CHRISTINE
of the
YOUNG HEART

LOUISE BREITENBACH CLANCY

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A NOVEL

BY

LOUISE BREITENBACH CLANCY

Author of "Alma of Hadley Hall," "Eleanor of
the Houseboat," etc., etc.

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TO

THE REAL PAUL DENTON—

MY HUSBAND

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CHRISTINE
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING CHRISTINE

The eyes of every man in the white marble lobby of the Tremont Club paid tribute to her youth and beauty. But Christine Trevor flashed by on the arm of Dr. Denton as unconscious of her loveliness as any flower of its fragrance. And, indeed, that blustery gray March afternoon she resembled nothing on earth so much as some rare yellow flower, with her hair of red-gold hooded under a yellow velvet toque, and her slim, lithe body encased in pale yellow broadcloth and brown furs, with the note of yellow artfully repeated in the bouquet of orchids and roses at her belt.

Her gold-brown eyes, brilliant with excitement, were raised to her companion's face, and she was chattering gaily as he hurried her through the revolving door.

"It was dear of you, Docky,"— smilingly she reverted to the pet name of her childhood for the grave-eyed man who was helping her into his cab —"to call for me. I was beginning to feel like one of the babes in the woods, lost or forgotten or something. Father said he'd send James and the limousine. Had a pretty bad smash in my own car yesterday — merely tried to push a street car out of my way in my hurry. But no James and no 'bus. Something must be the matter with father's 'phone — chief operator couldn't get me the line, and I've had the finest case of fidgets for the past half hour wondering how I'd ever make the Payne-Scrantons' dinner-dance they're giving for Cort and me to-night. None of the girls was going my way. Oh, Docky," she said, as if this were a new thought, "how did you happen to drop in for me? You're always eyes-over in work. Did father finally remember he had a daughter stranded at the club?"

"I was at your father's office," Dr. Denton returned, evasively.

"You're a perfect duck," she flashed up at him a warm smile. "Guggles, but I'm a frazzle. This bridge luncheon was a real bang-up affair to-day. Susanne said she knew she'd have to put on some side to make such a fêted, blasé, first-season-out girl as I bat even an eyelash. But you should have seen that wonderfully good-looking table, with the cleverest centerpiece to represent the ocean — of course, Cort and I were aboard the tiny yacht, headed for South America. All the girls told me in at least ten different ways how dead lucky I am to be invited on this cruise with Cort and his father and his ducky old Aunt Mary, now when things are beginning to stale here.

"But somehow, Docky, I never think about my being lucky — nice things are bound to happen to me. They always have. But what do you suppose Agnes Archer said to me?"

Dr. Denton skilfully threaded his way between a heavy automobile truck, a street car, and a street water-wagon, before he ventured a quiet, interrogative, "Yes?"

Christine tucked a rebellious strand of burnished gold hair under her toque as she answered, with her pretty swirl of laughter. " She said I'm the most spoiled of spoiled girls, that I'd always had everything for so long — nineteen whole years, Docky,— that I thought the whole world belonged to me. You know Agnes is — well, I'm awfully fond of her — but sometimes she does scratch until the blood comes. She went on to say that every one knows I'm the only débutante who didn't wear herself to a cat's shadow to get Cortland Van Ness, but it'd been my fool luck to have him fall for me at first sight, and she knew I didn't love him — I couldn't, because I didn't have a soul, or a heart, but some day I'd get one, a sort of Cupid-and-Psyche affair. Oh, I tell you Aggie was some little crabapple today, but I rather guess losing Cort's been rough on her, and she just had to blow off. We kissed goodbye like the best of friends, but," Christine shrugged her fine shoulders expressively, " I don't like unpleasant people or unpleasant things."

" I fear you'll put me in the same category," Dr. Denton remarked in his quiet way, when the girl stopped for breath. They had left the congested downtown thoroughfares and were humming swiftly out Jefferson Avenue, with its rapidly shifting panorama of magnificent homes set in spacious grounds, now shrouded in the gray of a quick-falling twilight. " I —"

He shot a glance at the radiant young face, drew a deep breath, hesitated, then plunged ahead. " Your father was taken ill in his office this afternoon."

Christine stared her disbelief. " Father ill! I never knew father'd take time to be ill. He's too busy."

"It would have been better," her companion began, with a hesitation foreign to his usual simple directness of manner, "if he had taken time. I've warned him —"

"He isn't very ill, though, is he?" she broke in, panic falling on her suddenly.

"It's very difficult to tell sometimes," he countered, "in these sudden seizures —" He cut himself short, only to draw a quick breath and proceed on another tack. "You've never seemed very attached to your father, Christie. My father was my idol as well as my ideal."

"Oh, father's all right," conceded the girl. "He's certainly been horribly generous with my allowance this year, and even when I've run up bills besides, he's never said a word, though once or twice I fancied he looked worried. Do you think father's had money troubles, Docky, and that's why he's ill now?" Through her voice surged a dread. "Have I been bankrupting him?"

Dr. Denton's answer came somewhat slowly, guardedly. "Your father's attack is the result of some tremendous shock. I doubt that your extravagances were a serious contributory cause to his — breakdown."

"You never can tell a thing about father," Christine went on, musingly. "He out-sphinxes the Sphinx in being mysterious and unapproachable, but being a débutante's a real *noblesse oblige,* Docky. You've got to do things and have things or you're in, not out. It's just that I don't know father. Why, sometimes I don't see him oftener than once a week, and then only for a jiff. I suppose things would have been heaps different," her eyes softened dreamily, "if mother hadn't been — taken the day Daffy and Dilly came. I can remember the ripping times we used to have in the nursery. You'd drop in after your visit to Laurie when mother was spinning one of her wonderful yarns before a rousing grate-fire, then we'd wind up by having a Zoo and all being wild animals. You always insisted on being a camel, and oh! —oh! — what thrilling rides you'd give us through the desert! You always seemed like a boy, just one of us, and mother and father were never tired of telling people of all you were doing for Laurie, though you were such a young doctor. I quite adored you in those days, Docky."

She laid a little flutter of a gloved hand on his arm, but the man said nothing. He kept his eyes fixed, not on the glowing young face at his shoulder, but on the strip of asphalt straight ahead.

"Then I went off to boarding-school," she took up the thread of reminiscence again, "and when I came home mother was gone and everything seemed different, even you." She sought his eyes with hers in the darkness of the cab but he still looked straight ahead. "You seemed so old and wise, and you always made me feel so young and foolish, and we never had any more romps in the nursery or cozy confidences on the davenport when I told you all my childish joys and sorrows."

"When you came back you were no longer my playfellow and little comrade," Dr. Denton spoke at last, "but a dignified young person, with her hair high on her head and her skirts trailing."

Christine's merry ripple of laughter floated out. "That was the style then to make yourself look like your own grandmother. But now I hardly ever see you. Oh, I don't need to be told I'm a gay butterfly, always on the wing. Father says I could pass the kiddies on the street and never know them, but the twins are such babies — they're never out of the nursery — and — and — Laurie —, I've seen it in your eyes ever so many times, Docky, you despise me for avoiding Laurie. But if you only knew how I hate, hate, hate ugly things. I just can't help loving gay, bright, beautiful people."

"Laurie's the gayest, brightest little soul that's ever strayed from heaven," commented her companion, more to himself than to her, "and he's beautiful, too. Not his body, but all the beauty that was denied his body went into the making of his soul. It's the beauty of his soul that makes him such a master of his violin. Why, the boy's a genius!"

Christine shivered involuntarily, and wrapped her furs more closely about her. "But he's crippled, and I never could forget that. Sometimes I think that Cort wouldn't be my — Cort," she admitted, with a sudden delicious shyness, "if he weren't the best-looking man on the globe. Of course," she added, with the honesty that was a part of the charm of Christine Trevor, "I'm glad he and father have slathers of money. I wouldn't want to marry Cort for money, but I'd die if I were poor and ugly and dirty and horrid-looking the way poor people always are. But Gug, what's got into me to talk like this? It isn't a bit like me. You're to blame, Docky, for scaring me into a purple fit, telling me father's ill."

Neither spoke again until Dr. Denton had swung the car into the stone gateway surmounted by huge lions couchant. Then, while they were rolling up the drive bordered by naked trees and bushes which were mournfully tossing in the wind, he said gently, "Christie, I told you I was the bearer of unpleasant news, but I did not tell you all. Your father was beyond my help when I reached his office."

There was an endless moment of silence before the girl demanded, in a tone of frozen horror, "D — do you mean father's dead? He can't be. Why, I saw him only this morning as he was driving away in the limousine."

"I know, child, and he probably looked the picture of health, but I've warned him repeatedly that his heart wasn't clicking right, and that he must avoid every form of excitement, but the financial crisis he passed through this afternoon —" He stopped short with a murmured exclamation of vexation at his unusual loquacity, but the girl had not heard him.

"Poor, poor father," she was whispering brokenly, her eyes swimming in tears. "I can't believe it," she sobbed, as he helped her out of the cab and up the stone steps. "It can't be true. Father dead! Have you — is he — home?"

Dr. Denton nodded.

Then she asked a question which showed that she, as always, was the center of her universe. "Will he — will it all be over by Thursday? We leave that night, you know."

"Leave that night!" he repeated in the tone of a man who does not trust his own ears. "You mean that you are not going to postpone your trip to South America? Christine!" His cry of amazement stayed with her to the end of her days. It was a full half minute before he spoke again and in that poignant silence she realized with a sudden rush of perception that she had disappointed him grievously. Even in her tumult of sorrow her heart throbbed with pain at his disapproval.

"Everything will be over," he was assuring her, as the butler, eyes red-rimmed, opened the lace-frosted front door. "I took the liberty of 'phoning Cort before I left your father's office," he added, as they entered the tapestry-hung hall. "He's probably here already."

"Mr. Van Ness is in the smoking-room?" she put the question to the butler with a show of carelessness, but her eyes glinted with an eager light.

"No, Miss Christine," Wilson replied. "No, no word from Mr. Van Ness," in answer to a second inquiry.

The deadly pallor of her cheeks and the quivering of her lips made Dr. Denton hasten to assert with a confident air, "He'll be here any moment now. I finally got in touch with him at the country club, and talked with him myself. You'd better go to your room, Christie, and try to rest. I'll send you word when he comes. But there are some arrangements I shall wish to consult him about first."

For a breath Christine did not move. Her eyes were fixed with a curious expression on the doctor's face. It was as if she were seeing him for the first time. Slowly she appraised him — the fine, luminous gray eyes, gray as the sea, the clear-cut nose, the mouth with the downward swing of humor, the body, tall, straight, of a clean athleticism which ten years of hardworking professional life had not interrupted.

Even the slender suppleness of the surgeonly hands did not escape her.

"I ought to know better than to expect Cort," she said in a low tone as if to herself. "He isn't you." She suddenly contracted her brows as if from a spasm of pain. "I — I never thought of it before but Cort and I are horribly alike in some ways. We both love sunshine and laughter and hate tears. He won't come to-night." Wearily she trailed up the stairs, a lonely, disconsolate little figure.

CHAPTER II

A CHANGE OF FORTUNE

In her bedroom, exquisite in its fittings of burnt ivory and yellow hangings, Christine stopped only long enough to let Marie, her maid, divest her of hat, coat, and furs, then moved into her sitting-room beyond. She threw herself into a low chair before the crackling grate-fire, and there she huddled the long hours through, dinnerless, waiting, hoping, ears straining for the sound of a step and a voice, sick with a dull conviction that he would not come.

When the ivory-and-gold clock on the mantel tinkled eleven musical notes, she started up with an agonized little cry, " Cort, Cort, why don't you come? "

She dropped back into her chair, and plunged her face into trembling hands. She was undergoing for the first time in her young life the torment of waiting, waiting, counting the hours and the minutes, while she ran the gamut of hope, despair, indignation, sorrow that would not yield to tears. Would the black hours never end? Would the morning and the sunlight never come?

She sprang up to switch on the lamp on the reading-table. With a quick, tremulous breath of relief she lingered in the circle of warm gold light. It was almost as gaily bright as the sunshine. No more gray shadowland of fears! No more gloomy thoughts! If only the wind would stop wailing! How her heart ached and ached! She would never see her father again. He had been a lavishly generous father. Countless acts of his devotion, at the time coolly accepted as her due, came back into her memory to reproach her. If only Cort had come for even a half-second —!

Determinedly she tried to swing her thoughts onward to the happiness in store for her on the cruise to South America with Cort. Her mind would slip from the leash by which she was seeking to hold it. Her father was dead! Perhaps if she had not been so wrapped up in herself and the intoxicating pursuit of pleasure, she would have known he was overworking. If he had not been so busy — no, she would be honest with herself, if she had not been so self-absorbed — he had always met her slightest effort at friendly interest more than three-quarters of the way — they might have been pals like Agnes Archer and her father. A sense of a missed opportunity, a sense of loss and desolation overwhelmed her. Then vague, half-forgotten scenes of her childhood began to paint themselves on her mind.

Soon she was living over again those happy, carefree days when life for her had centered in the home. Suddenly memory dragged up a broken promise. She had made it in all good faith the night before she had left for boarding-school. Even now through the mist of time and forgetfulness she could see the picture. The firelight playing softly on her mother's face which was touched with a strange note of melancholy — she had not noticed it then — and herself, a girl of twelve, nestling at her mother's feet.

"It may be that I shall be called away, my darling," her mother had mused, as she sat stroking the young head of gold, "and you'll have some of my responsibilities on your shoulders. Promise me, Christie," even yet the girl could see that strangely tense look her mother had bent upon her, "you'll be a comrade to your father and a real big sister to the little ones."

"Of course, mother," and the promise had been sealed with a hug and a kiss.

"There's something else, Goldilocks," her mother had gone on in a troubled way after a moment of silence, "that I've been thinking about, ever so hard, these last few days when it came to me perhaps I'd be — taken. It may be left for you to right a wrong of mine. But, no, child, you're too young to have your life shadowed with my burdens. Perhaps —"

Her father had appeared just then, and her mother at once had broken out into something bright and merry, as was her way.

She had not kept that promise. Now it was too late. She would be off before the end of the week for two or three months at least, and then in the early summer would come her marriage to Cort. After that — Her thoughts drifted. What wrong had her mother intended her to right? Would she ever know? Had her father known? She sat for a long time, her chin in her hands, staring straight at the opposite wall.

If only she could throw off this strange weight of oppression, these torturing memories! If only she had been more of a daughter to her father — Now it was all too late. Too late! The words drummed themselves with maddening repetition into her consciousness. Docky had seemed — well, surprised, that she did not intend to postpone her trip. But, merciful goodness, that was not to be thought of even for a breath.

The morning had worn itself almost to a close before a maid brought Christine, still immured in her room, the card of Cortland Van Ness. But the tenderness with which he welcomed her when she slipped into the library erased some of the aching hurt from her heart. He was so handsome, this black-eyed, black-haired, Italian-looking young man, clothed in the perfection of the tailor's art, that she fell in love with him all over again. As she nestled close to him, she hardly heard his stream of excuses. He had had every intention of running up last night, had in fact, promised Denton he'd cut his dinner engagement at the club and come on the fly, but Canfield, Clarence Canfield, you know, in town only for the night, on his way to Japan, had caught him as he was headed for his car, and had — yes, dragged was the word, dragged him back into the billiard-room, and by the Lord Harry, before he knew it, it was devilish late, and then this morning that fool of a Thompson had done something or other to put his roadster on the blink when he ran it out of the garage, and it had taken longer than he'd expected to get it into shape again. He hoped she wasn't on edge with him because he hadn't come sooner.

On edge with him! How could she be? She had known by an intuitive flash what kind of excuses he would make. And she had known, too, what the real reason was for his non-appearance. He had put off coming to her as long as he decently could because like herself he dreaded the unpleasant issues of life. Holy Doodles! illness, sorrow, tears, death, were bound to come to a fellow sooner or later, but why run after them?

So Christine accepted Cortland Van Ness' excuses at least with outward sweetness and promptly forgave him. As well quarrel with him because his eyes were black, not brown or blue, as row with him for not coming to her in her first moments of stress. She found it comforting in her mental shipwreck to anchor quietly, safely, in the haven of his arms.

"Poor little Chris!" He stroked her pale cheek. "It's mighty hard on you, dear, having your father go off so suddenly, and especially at this time, but it mustn't make any difference in our plans."

She clung to him with a sudden childlike terror. "Are you perfectly sure — you — would you still want me, Cort, if father didn't leave much money?"

He kissed her with a fierceness that left her breathless. "I've always managed to get what I want, Chris, and you're what I'm set on having deuced bad right now. You sure bowled me clean over, little girl, the instant I set eyes on you last winter at the Grayson dinner-dance. Oh, I know, I've the name for being fickle." He threw back his head, and laughed his ringing, boyish laugh. Almost instantly he checked himself and looked at Christine in a shamefaced way as if he expected a reproof for his unseemly boisterousness. "You've teased me good and plenty," he went on in a hushed manner, "about all the cases I've had on girls, but they were in my green-and-salad days before I knew you. Small chance of your losing me, Chris, if you came to me a beggar girl. But what put the idea into your head, little one?"

She shivered in spite of the warmth of the room. "Oh, I had nothing but ugly thoughts and conscience stabs last night. Ugh, it was a ghastly nightmare of a night."

"Money'll be the least of our worries." He caught her shoulders and swung her close to him. "Father's got more than enough to satisfy his only offspring, and I rather fancy the old gentleman won't leave it all to charity." He managed to stifle the laugh which rose to his lips at his own wit. "But to tell the truth, the governor's been rather sore lately because I couldn't see myself taking the run of the flour mill. I tell him 'work's for the working class.' I'm not especially clever, Chris —" it was difficult for him to keep his loud, young voice properly subdued to the atmosphere of death—" but I sure did make some wise choice when I picked out old Cortland Van Ness, the first, for a grandfather. Old Cort was some boy when it came to exchanging a few dollars for what looked like a worthless strip of land and father takes after him, but Cortland third can't get the idea of poking around in overalls in a dusty-musty old mill when there are such things as yachts and tennis courts and brassies in this gay old world."

"It isn't such a gay old world to-day," mused the girl wistfully. "Everything seems so dismal and horrible I can hardly breathe. I do wish the sun would shine."

"You've been shut up in this gloomy house too long, dear. Whew, I'm beginning to feel blue, myself! Come on out for a spin, and cut out worrying. Of course, I'd be the last person on earth to hear it if your father'd been shaky — keeping my coat-tails clean of business and business worries as I do — but I don't believe it. All my life I've heard father say John Trevor's safe as the bank of England. Just look at the way he's managed the trust fund of the Widows and Orphans of St. Mark's. Father's on the board with him, you know, has been for years, and he says your father is — was, I mean — a winner. Why, child, I'd as soon expect the Union Trust to cave in as your father."

An hour after this she telephoned to Dr. Denton. Her cheeks were glowing from the swift ride in the biting wind, and her eyes glinted with excitement.

"Congratulate me, Docky," she burst out, when his familiar voice sounded in her ear. "Cort and I are going to be married in New York Saturday morning before we sail. I wanted you to be the first to know."

There was a second of silence, then, "God bless you, dear child, and make you the happiest of girls."

In Christine's memory the next two days always stood out as a horrible, confused, crowded dream. The house was deathly quiet. About it hung an air of disuse, despite the throng of persons who came and went on one mission or other. To her tortured fancy it seemed as if the whole town were pouring into the Trevor doors. Night or day, it mattered not, they came, family friends, her father's business associates, the poor and the outcast to whom in his quiet way he had always held out a helping hand. Christine learned to know her father in those two days. Each one who entered that house — and they came from all parts of the city — helped her to understand the integrity, the breadth of soul, the unselfishness and the love of his fellow man that had made John Trevor beloved of all.

And all through those sunless days of sorrow she was tortured with an unceasing ache in her heart, a wild craving to hear her father's voice again, the longing for an opportunity, if only for an hour, to redeem her promise to her mother. Over and over the words beat themselves in desperate iteration into her brain, "too late, too late."

She awoke on Thursday to sunshine and bright blue skies. Instantly, some of the weight of sadness dropped away. As she dressed she smiled at the girl limned in the mirror, and once whispered, "bride." She whispered it again as the color came running up into her cheeks.

She had closed the door of her bedroom behind her, and was moving rapidly down the hall, slim and straight and fair as a fresh-cut lily in her morning frock of white, when she heard childish voices and turned to see the twins pelt down the stairs from the nursery.

Daphne, familiarly known as Daffy, one of the six-year-old twins, with the face of a Raphael angel and the spirit of an imp, led the way as usual. "We are *so,* Mr. Dilly," she was insisting, in a shrill whisper. "We're poorer'n anything. I heard 'Melia say so to Marie, 'n' 'Melia knows everything."

Dilly, abbreviated from John Dillingham Trevor, appeared unconvinced. "It'd be bully fun. We'd have to go 'n' live in a bits of a cottage, 'n' eat things in a tin pail like Jim when he helps Tom garden, 'n' — bugs, 'tain't true. I just know it 'tain't, so there.

You just see, we'll have to stick in that old nursery till we're most dead, 'n' do lessons 'n' lessons 'n' lessons. Hunky, it'd be great to go to school like poor kids 'n' stick things in your pockets to eat at recess 'n'— Laurie'll tell us. He knows a lot 'n' he never tries to fool a fellow."

Christine stared until the hurrying little figures had vanished in a curve in the winding staircase. Her eyes were black with sudden fear. Then she laughed scornfully at herself. "That's nothing but servants' gossip. There isn't a word of truth — I'll 'phone Docky." Instantly her mind had turned to the unfailing comforter of her childhood days.

But she did not have to telephone to him. From the upper hallway she heard his voice, and leaning over the marble balustrade, she saw him deliver hat and coat into Wilson's keeping. She racketed down the stairs to him. "Docky," she met his smiling eyes squarely, as he took her hands, "tell me the truth." She caught her breath quiveringly, "Are we — are we going to be — poor?"

His face changed. For a moment he did not speak. His eyes were upon her. She looked so young, so appealing in her wood-nymph whiteness.

"There are some things I want to make clear to you." He led her into the library and settled her in the old familiar position among the cushions of the huge davenport. "That's what brought me here so early. Graves and your father's lawyer won't be here with the will for an hour or two."

For full ten minutes he explained simply a small measure of what her father's private secretary and confidential man, George Graves, had revealed to him.

But though she listened with every nerve taut to understand, it was all a wild jumble of unfortunate investments, an unforeseen and rather inexplicable depression in the stock market, an overconfident endorsement and loss of an overwhelmingly large amount, and above all, a thunderclap of a bank failure. What she did manage to gather was that it would all have to go, home, servants, automobiles.

"Thank you, Docky," she said mechanically, and rose to her feet at the impatient honking of an automobile horn outside on the driveway. "There's Cort. We've a thousand things to arrange before we're off."

From the doorway she slipped back to lay both hands on his arm. "You've been a perfect dear. Somehow I can bear it better, coming from you. But it's so terrible to be — poor." She turned away, but the next breath was smiling up at him through tear-wet eyes. "I suppose this is good-bye, Docky. There won't be a smidge of time later. I don't want you to remember me as a fountain of woe that's forever spilling over. Please think of me as a happy bride."

He was very calm, but somewhat white about the mouth as he caught both her hands in a warm vital clasp. "I shall always remember you as my merry little comrade, Goldilocks."

Later in the morning she was flying down the hall on her way to the library where she hoped to find a mislaid book she had promised to bring for Cort's Aunt Mary. A swift impulse halted her at the closed door of her father's study. An overpowering longing gripped her to be once more in the room in which she should always image him. For a moment she hesitated, then gently, very gently turned the knob. She stepped no farther than the doorway. There in her father's favorite chaise-longue lay Laurie, the boy with the twisted body and the beautiful soul. On a stool at his feet sat his devoted attendant, Amelia. A small frock she had been embroidering had fallen to the floor. Tears were streaming down her withered cheeks.

The music came to a soft close. The girl in the doorway would have crept away, but Amelia's first words stayed her, "Sellin' that violin'll break my heart, Master Laurie. What'd your poor father say?"

The boy did not speak for an instant, then he said dreamily, "I think it would please him. It's been very beautiful to have three such friends, father, and you, and my violin. But soon there'll only be you, 'Melia. Are you real sure you're not going to mind it if we can't pay you much?"

"Never a penny do I want, precious lamb. I've got savin's, thanks to your good father, that'll do me my lifetime. Doin' for you's pay enough. But how'll you make out without your music box, I'd like to know."

"I'll have more time to do lessons, and play with the twins," he answered cheerily, "and spring's coming, 'Melia, and you know, I don't play quite so much then, the birds and flowers are so wonderful. Of course, it's going to be a little lonesome at night without — Isn't it almost time for Champney to come for my violin?" He laid his cheek caressingly against the satiny wood. "He promised he'd bring the money with him, didn't he? Marie said Christine could buy lots of pretty things with that much when she's in New York."

"Trust Christine to have pretty things a-plenty," muttered Amelia, with a frankness born of long years of service in the Trevor family, "and everything else she wants."

"Marie says a débutante never has enough duds," championed the boy warmly. "Besides, things wear out, you know they do, 'Melia. Anyhow, Christine's got to have nice clothes; she's the most beautiful girl in the world, I think. I — I just wish I had ten violins to give her."

Christine caught her breath with a choking little sound. "I didn't mean to listen, but I did!" She faced the charge of two pairs of astonished eyes. "You mustn't, Laurie, I don't want it. I won't let you," she cried out in hot protest, and closed the door tempestuously behind her.

CHAPTER III

A MARRIAGE POSTPONED

All thought of the book for the South American jaunt forgotten, Christine fled to her bedroom and flung herself, face down, on the satin-and-lace-covered bed. For a few moments she gave way to sharp, hard, body-wrenching sobs. But they were not tears of grief. It was anger that flamed within her, anger and burning resentment. Was she already an object of charity? Did Laurie have to martyrize himself by parting with his dearest possession for her sake? In fancy, she could hear the servants roll this delicious morsel of gossip under their tongues. The boy whom she had frankly shunned, yes, neglected, was sacrificing his heart's blood for the pleasure of his butterfly sister. Oh, she hated him for it, hated him, hated everybody, and everything that stood for sacrifice.

In a few short hours now she would be out of it all, the gloom, and stress, and unhappiness. Soon she would be her own gay self with a heart light as thistledown. She would fairly steep herself in sunshine, laughter and love.

She flashed to her feet; she had small time for tears or thinking. There were still countless orders for Marie, a hundred uncompleted odds and ends. But her thoughts would not swing forward to the blue waters of the trip that was to be her honeymoon.

They would revolve only about the tiny stream of her home life and the children. Where would they live? Docky had said everything — home, servants, automobiles — must go. Who would care for the twins? Laurie would be safeguarded in the loving hands of Amelia. But where? A pang shot through her heart. Where would their home be? If only they had some wealthy old childless uncle or aunt who would gladly adopt them now in their poverty! Poverty! She ground her teeth at the very word. Poverty was not for such as she. She was pretty, young, thrillingly young and thrillingly alive. Wealth and happiness were her inalienable right.

But they had no fairy godmother, uncle or aunt to befriend them. Her father and her mother had both been only children, orphaned early in their youth. No, there were no relatives to whom they could turn. Friends? She ticked off the long list of family friends, one after the other, as a possible source of aid. The Owen-Hamptons, her father's closest friends, were trailing in their yacht somewhere through Mediterranean waters. Included in their party were the John Lyles and the Peter Van Horns. A winter in the Orient was the present plan. She couldn't reach out to them for help. Mrs. George Herbert, her mother's intimate friend, and a kindly soul that was always befriending the friendless! But no, a letter had come from her that very morning — she had been ordered to a mountain sanatorium for an indefinite period of rest. The Phil McEwens and the Harry Thompsons had wired they were hers to command, but their return from California was still indefinite and the Gregorys and Gormans and Stanleys were still on their Florida plantations. She might appeal to Mrs. Victor Hobart. Sally and she had danced their way through life together from their first day in kindergarten. But Sally had been thrown from her horse but a fortnight before, and a wheel-chair for life now threatened her. The Payne-Scrantons, and the Ashbys, and the Archers, and many others had been lavish in their manifestations of sympathy, but one couldn't thrust a whole family on any of them. No, there was not a friend to whom she could turn for help in this teasing problem. To be sure, there was Mrs. Austin, the gentlewoman who had chaperoned her during this, her first season, as a bud. But Christine dismissed her mentally with a prompt certainty — she was a hireling whose services could not be counted on without a generous compensation.

As always, her mind pivoted swiftly in her moment of need to Dr. Denton. He would know the answer to her problem — he always had in her childhood. She snatched a glance at her wrist-watch. There would be time for a fifteen minute visit if she pelted. The thought had hardly formed before, with the impulsive haste so natural to her, Christine had flung herself into her moleskin motor coat and hidden her bright hair under a fur toque.

Less than ten minutes later she was whizzing down Jefferson Avenue in her brown roadster with its perfection of appointments. In her dexterous flight the thought came to stab her that this was the last time she would thrill with a sense of power as her hands guided the wheel of this beloved car. But there was immediate balm for the wound in the thought that as Cort's wife, she could have its mate.

The doctor's office hours were over for the afternoon, the young woman in attendance at the desk assured Christine pleasantly, but the doctor was still in his private office, engaged on a matter of business.

"Dr. Denton will see no more patients this afternoon," remarked the young woman suavely, as Christine huddled herself into a leather chair, and began impatiently to turn the leaves of a magazine which she had caught up from a nearby table. "He's overdue now at the Receiving Hospital."

"I am not a patient," Christine remarked, in the detached tone she always reserved for underlings. There was no arrogance in her manner, merely a please-remember-you're-on-earth-to-serve air. "I shall wait till the doctor's at liberty."

Christine tried to interest herself in the printed page, but her chaotic thoughts refused to be enmeshed. Impatiently she cast the magazine on the floor, and moved restlessly about the waiting-room. She observed with indifference the few really fine prints on the wall, crossed to a window, gazed out with unseeing eyes, then flung herself with a hardly suppressed exclamation of exasperation into a chair near the private-office door. The young office attendant had disappeared some time before into the doctor's laboratory, and Christine who had been telling herself for the past ten minutes that she would wait no longer, was divided in mind whether she should recall the young person or leave a note on Docky's desk.

She had already drawn a sheet of the doctor's notepaper out of the desk drawer when the private-office door opened and she heard a voice that she instantly recognized as the monotone of her father's confidential man, though now it was high-keyed with passion. "I hope before I die I'll set eyes on that old curmudgeon," George Graves was saying, " whoever he is. I long to assure him with my own tongue he's the murderer of John Trevor, as fine a man as God ever set on this wicked old earth. He's got to stand and listen while I tell him, if it's the last breath I draw, that had he negotiated that loan there'd be dozens, yes, hundreds of widows and orphans of St. Mark's that wouldn't be crying their eyes out this day, and Mr. Trevor'd be here and alive, and that trust fund —"

The girl straightened, every nerve strained, every muscle taut. What of that trust fund, the pride and honor of her father?

" I swear to you, Dr. Denton," she heard the excited voice rage on, " it was this that did for him. He could 've stood losing ten fortunes of his own, but to stand by and see that fund go when that old skinflint, God send his soul to hell, needed only to reach out a helping hand. Good Lord, John Trevor gave the best of his brains and thought to that fund for years, and next to that crippled boy of his — and you and I know, Doctor, how he worshipped the lad — that trust fund was what he lived for."

" How he worshipped that lad! " Christine's mind caught up and repeated the words wonderingly. She had not known of this comradeship between father and son.

" And Laurie's been so interested in that fund," the doctor said, more to himself than to his companion. " It's been the one big, vital interest in his shut-in life. Mr. Trevor realized it more every day, and enjoyed nothing better than to talk over things with the boy, and tell him of the lads who were to benefit by the fund when —"

"The little lad must be kept from knowing," interrupted the other, sorrowfully. "That poor chap's going to have a hard enough struggle without —"

For some reason the girl did not hear the rest of his sentence. Perhaps because her mind completed it mechanically for her, "without losing faith in his father."

So not only fortune but also her father's honor was lost. For a long, long moment she sat, too dazed to move or even to think. Then her confused brain began to work again. Thoughts began to take shape in her mind. The name of Trevor dishonored! She had always been extravagantly proud of her name. She remembered now with painful distinctness how she had half-pitied, half-scorned, a schoolmate who had been forced to leave school precipitately when her father had absconded with a princely fortune.

Her father's disgrace would be on every tongue. She would never be able to hold up her head again, or face her friends. Agnes and the other girls had spoken more truly than they knew — she was dead-lucky to have this honeymoon trip with Cort at this unpleasant time — and when she was back among them again she would bear the magic name of Mrs. Cortland Van Ness.

With a maddening persistency the words of her father's confidential man repeated themselves in her mind —"That poor little chap's going to have a hard enough time without —"

A sudden inexplicable choking longing possessed her to keep Laurie from ever finding out. If only his father could always remain for him his ideal, his knight. Immediately she began to plan ways and means to keep the truth from him. The servants must never — She sprang to her feet with a little strangled sound. There would be no servants, and in but a few hours now she would be on her way.

A moment later George Graves had bowed himself out of the private office and closed the outer door behind him. She was dimly grateful that he had been too engrossed to notice her.

Christine rapped and tore open the door almost simultaneously. Dr. Denton faced about from his desk at the sound of her explosive entrance.

"You!" He rose and hurried to her, both hands outstretched. Vaguely she wondered why she had not realized before how Docky's smile warmed one, and how fascinatingly it communicated itself from his lips to his eyes.

"I mustn't take your time, Docky," she began, but unresistingly let him lead her to a chair, and loosen her motor coat. "Your office girl almost turned me out, she said you were late —" She gazed at him questioningly, then at his pleasant assurance that he always had time for her, continued, "And I'm in a dead hurry too."

But it was all of a minute before she could bring herself to ask the question which had sent her with impulsive haste to him. Then she blurted it out, "What's going to become of the children? Where'll they live? Who'll look after them?"

"One at a time, Goldilocks." Smilingly he appropriated her mother's pet name for her. Goldilocks!

How that childish term of endearment brought it all back, the happy, irresponsible days of her childhood, the close companionship of her mother, her broken promise! "Mr. Graves just left — by the way, didn't you meet him in the elevator?" As from afar off his voice came.

"He — we didn't speak," she brought out, evasively. She couldn't speak as yet even to Docky of the loss of the trust fund and her father's dishonor. When she was well on the ocean she would write and tell him of all she had overheard. But now, the wound was still too new, too pain-filled to uncover even to his kindly gaze.

Dr. Denton threw himself back in his revolving chair, his hands clasped behind his head. "Mr. Graves and I were just completing some final arrangements for the comfort of the children," he hastened to assure her. "Friends of your family have fairly swamped us with their kind offers of assistance, but we've decided for the present to try out a plan of mine. You can go off without the shadow of a worry as a bride should." Again he smiled at her as she sat hunched slimly in her chair, but there came no answering smile into the gold-irised brown eyes. Instead, her straight brows had met frowningly and her face was intensely earnest.

"Before you've been out three days the little ones will be pleasantly settled in Merrivale —"

"Not in that tumble-down old house where father used to live as a boy," Christine cut in, with open dismay.

"It's a bit old-fashioned, I admit," the doctor told her cheerily, "but it's mighty comfortable with its big, sunny rooms, and fine old garden. I've heard your father and mother say the happiest days of their lives were spent there. They moved into more fashionable quarters just before you came to them. And Merrivale's a pleasant, healthy suburb, even if people of fashion turn up their noses at its unpretentiousness; besides it has the advantage of being close to my home. I want to keep my eyes on the little Trevor flock, while you're gone."

She was silent. A tiny disk of color flamed bright in either cheek. Her eyes were on the jeweled gold-mesh bag with which her fingers were toying, but she was in reality gazing inwardly at the well-remembered but distasteful image of the old-fashioned house in the unfashionable suburb, which her father had once pointed out to her with pride as his boyhood's home, on one of their infrequent motor trips together.

"Oh, but it's so ugly and — squatty," she said unintentionally aloud, with a little shiver.

"The house? Yes, but it'll have to do. Besides, the children won't need much room, with only Amelia to mother them, and an old protegée of mine who's consented to run the house —"

"Only two servants?" She lifted her eyes to his in frank distress.

He scrutinized the willful, charming face of the girl a long moment before he rejoined gravely, "Christine, if you weren't leaving so shortly and if you weren't coming back to a life of fashion, I'd take time to tell you that some people — people who are the salt of the earth, too — haven't even one servant. I'd even be tempted to carry you off some day for a visit to some of my patients. They're the noblest of the noble, some of them, and they serve your kind. But there, forgive me, child."

For a moment after he had finished, the silence remained unbroken. Christine sat with her chin cupped in her hands, staring at vacancy. All her usual buoyancy seemed struck out of her. Suddenly she shrugged her shoulders as if to rouse herself to the present reality.

"I — I overheard Laurie planning to sell his violin to give me some spending money." A quiver caught her lip in spite of herself. Her eyes held the torture of a hurt animal, but even while she was speaking, curiously enough, the realization came that her resentment towards the boy had cleared away. "Of course I wouldn't dream of letting him — ugh," she shuddered, "these last few days have been my idea of a nightmare."

The room was singularly quiet for a moment, then her words came brokenly, "I'm glad, glad, glad, to get away from it all. Glad," she insisted, in a voice shaking with defiance, then with an uncontrollable little sob,—"I'm the wretchedest thing on earth."

For pride's sake she fled to the window. Her soft lower lip was caught between her teeth. She would not let the tears that stung her eyes overflow. Presently she turned and met Dr. Denton's grave gaze. What she read there in the fine, luminous eyes made her glance waver and fall. She knew she was not measuring up to his standard of womanhood and it hurt her inconceivably. Restlessly she moved away from the window and sat down with her eyes fixed on her hands, which had begun to toy nervously again with her purse. Followed a minute of poignant silence. Christine's fingers were still now. Her eyes had grown dark with brooding. Suddenly she flung up her head and the color came sweeping into her cheeks. With the next breath she was on her feet and had snatched up the telephone. Chokily she gave the number, but her head was lifted high and her voice held even and firm as she insisted for the third time, "I mean it, Cort. I'm not going, I can't go. I'll marry you when you get back."

CHAPTER IV

LISTENERS NEVER HEAR ANY GOOD OF THEMSELVES

Christine whirled about from hurling her thunderbolt to face the doctor. She was flushed, exalted, thrilling with excitement, but to her amazement she was not overwhelmed with a storm of applause. Instead for a long moment he studied her with what she told herself was calm, cool disapproval.

"Of course you're going," he announced at last, with an air of finality. "There is absolutely no reason why you should alter your plans. Laurie and the twins'll be in good hands — I've already assured you of that. Besides," he added in a gentler tone, as if to soften the sting of his words, "I'm afraid you won't fit into the household, contracted as it must be."

She moved uneasily under his steady gaze. "I suppose you're right," she said slowly, as if this were a wholly new thought. "I won't have the lambiest kind of a time but I've got to stick it out."

"You must go, Christine." Dr. Denton's tone was matter-of-fact but his eyes were alight with a curious fire. "Call up Cort again. Tell him you've thought it over. You've changed your mind. You're going. Think of all it means to you and Cort," he urged. "This trip —"

"Please, please, Docky," she broke in, tensely, "I ache to go but I can't. I've got to stay here. Don't say another word about it. It's going to be hard enough when Cort gets here. Talk of something else, please."

He yielded to the sweet pleading in her voice and for the next ten minutes exerted himself to catch her interest with other threads of life.

But she did not hear him. She sat hunched in her chair, her face drained of color, her eyes dark with dread, never moving from the rug under her feet, her brain a vortex of conflicting emotions. "Listen," she put up her hand. They both heards steps plunging down the corridor. The next instant Cort burst tempestuously into the inner office.

"Made it in eleven minutes and a half," he panted, dropping his watch back into his pocket. "Could have whizzed through in a clean ten but for a traffic hold-up. Some record, what, Chris? 'Afternoon, Dr. Denton. Now, girl," he possessed himself of both ice-cold, trembling little hands which he held in a tight grip, "what's this all about? Let's have it in a hurry, dear," he went on, with a careless tenderness. "We haven't a minute to spare. They won't hold the train for us even for father's private car. I suppose it's just a case of nerves, what, Doctor? Come, let's have it, Chris, tears and all," he ended, with a big gusty laugh.

"There isn't anything to tell, Cort." She stood up and eyed him squarely but her lips were white and unsteady, and her bosom heaved over her tumultuous emotions. "It's only that it came over me all at once — I can't go."

"Can't go?" he repeated, with characteristic impatience. "Funny time to decide that. Why, it's less than three hours before train time and I've already made all sorts of arrangements for —"

"Don't, Cort," she caught her breath, quiveringly. "Don't make it any harder than it already is. Can't you see it's taking all the best of me to make me stay?"

"Hang it, Chris," he growled, when he had attacked her vainly from every side with coaxing, threats, pleading, caresses, "you talk like a child. There's nothing to make you stay if you don't want to. Denton's told you that over and over. There's no reason you should stay"— he stopped long enough in his restless pacing to kick over a stool —"unless you've changed your mind —" He broke off, his face ugly with a sudden suspicion.

She turned on him like a lovely flame. "Of course I haven't changed my mind, foolish boy. It's only that something's keeping me — I don't know myself what it is." The last words were spoken too low for Cort or the doctor to catch.

The bleak March afternoon had drawn to a close and the room was darkly gray when the eyes of the two men met and acknowledged their defeat, but the girl facing them, tall with the slimness of a boy, even in her heavy motor coat, did not glow with the pride of a conqueror. She looked pale, spent.

"I'm going now," she murmured with twitching lips. "No, please, don't either of you come with me. I've got to be alone. Cort, Cort," she remonstrated a moment later breathlessly, freeing herself from the triumphant fury of his embrace, "please, Cort dear," she whispered, "this must be goodbye — here — now. No, don't k-kiss me again. I c-can't stand it n-now."

She held out her hand. He crushed it fiercely against his lips.

"Good-bye, Docky. No, it's au revoir, isn't it?" Before the doctor, who had considerately turned his back and was gazing contemplatively out of the window at the street below, could reply she had flashed about and was gone.

Christine's high resolution endured until Marie came for final orders to her sitting-room, where she sat, still in motor coat and hat. The trunks were all locked, and the traveling-bag was ready to close. Madame Clothilde had sent home the traveling outfit a half-hour ago and she positively had turned out a creation that would make Miss Christine the envy of all South America. Would Miss Christine choose to gaze at that sweet chiffon —?

"Take everything out of the trunks, Marie," Christine cut short her volubility, in a tone of infinite weariness. "I am not going to South America."

The girl stood like a figure of wax. Her hands extended for her mistress' coat were still outstretched. Her mouth hung open. Curiosity and surprise had widened her eyes.

"And after to-night I'll not need you, Marie. Of course I shall give you good recommendations."

Marie gave a shrug that spoke volumes. "I've already as good as got another position," she rejoined, with a saucy toss of the head. "Miss Archer's been after me for months, and they do say as how she's not pernickety, and she hasn't half the hair you've got, and she's awful generous with her tips, and of course now, Miss Christine, you couldn't —"

Christine interrupted with an imperious gesture of dismissal, and the girl slipped jauntily from the room.

So this was what she could expect from now on. Burning with resentment Christine buried her face in her hands. What a goose she had been to throw away her shining opportunity, and expose herself to such insults! Docky and Cort had pleaded with her, yes, commanded her to go. Why should she care about a broken promise — she had made it when she was a mere babe — or a look of disappointment in a pair of gray eyes?

The room was dark when a lightning-flash of decision brought her to her feet. She snapped on her desk-lamp. The tiny jeweled watch on her wrist told her that Cort and the others of his party were already whirling gaily eastward. She would go after all. She would telegraph. She could catch the midnight express and reach New York in time to sail. She caught up her desk-telephone. How should she word the message? She had already given the number when George Graves' words came unbidden into her mind, "that poor chap's going to have a hard enough time without —"

Mechanically she hooked up the receiver, and dropped in a disconsolate little heap on the window-seat. For the first time in her life Christine faced herself with a grim honesty. Well she knew that all her young days her feet had danced gaily down the primrose path of pleasure. Now she had chosen to set them in duty's narrow, difficult track, and there they must stay, however halting the progress might be, at least until the South American cruise was over and Cort came to claim her for his own. Her ideas of the meaning of duty were, to say the least, rather sketchy, but, of course, it would involve nothing but disagreeable things, of that she was firmly convinced. Well, she would have to untie her tangled knot somehow, but one point was strangely clear in all the mental chaos — the thing that had been the burden of her answer to Cort's pleading — a power stronger than her love of pleasure was anchoring her fast at home.

But though she had decided that she must sacrifice her happiness for the present to the welfare of the family, she made no effort to interest herself in its problems. During the stressful days of breaking up the home, she secluded herself in her rooms, there to pour out her heart in long letters to Cortland Van Ness. Steadfastly she refused to see any of the Trevor family friends or the girls of her "set." She told herself, with a bitterness strange to her light-hearted, laughter-loving nature, that she would have none of their pity or condescending kindness. She even shrank from exchanging an unnecessary word with a servant. Her greatest fear was that some one would touch, it did not matter how lightly, the aching wound of the failure of the trust fund and her father's shameful disgrace, as she put it mentally.

Once or twice after midnight she ran her car out to Merrivale, and, unobserved in the darkness, surveyed the house that was again to be the Trevor home. It was worse than her imagination had pictured it, she thought with a lump in her throat. Low, rambling, squatty-small, irregular, hardly fit for servants' quarters! Why, a tall person like Docky would have to duck his head when he entered, the ceilings must be so low and tumble-down.

She consoled herself with the thought that she would have to live there only two months — Cort had vowed he would cut the trip as short as his father would allow — and sixty days couldn't stretch themselves into a lifetime. If only she could keep her motor car! The days wouldn't seem so drearily endless if she could whirl through the country roads. But that was out of the question, she reminded herself with a wry little smile.

Her heart was heavy and her spirits had dropped to the lowest ebb when she raced through a driving, gusty rain one late-April afternoon to the old house in Merrivale. It would be the last drive in her favorite car. She had purposely delayed her coming as long as she could, and so, when Amelia threw open the front door to her, she had a glimpse of a living-room beyond the entrance hall, aglow with softly shaded lights, with Laurie and the twins already gathered before a leaping fire in a huge open fireplace.

"You must be damp-cold, Christine. Do come in and warm up a bit with the children," invited Amelia, with the friendly, privileged air of an old family serving-woman.

But the girl with a murmur of refusal pushed past her and began to climb the broad, winding stairs. Half way up she turned her head to ask, "Which room's mine, 'Melia?"

"First room to the right," the woman answered civilly, but under her breath she murmured, "and of course the best in the house."

"Send a tray to my room, just tea and jam and muffins'll do. I've a headache, and shan't come down to dinner to-night."

Amelia peered up at the girl on the staircase as if distrustful of her hearing. "You haven't forgot so soon, have you, Christine, you haven't eight servants any more?" she inquired, quietly. "I'll fix you a tray myself to-night, but after this, if you want extra service, I'm fearin'"—with a gentle firmness—"you'll have to be waitin' on yourself."

Christine made no answer. Hard experience had taught her the folly of trying to change a fiat of Amelia's. Disconsolately she mounted the rest of the stairs and hurried to her room. In the doorway she stood still, then rubbed her eyes like a bewildered child. It was a long, low room, of an enchantingly irregular shape, that she surveyed, and so completely fitted out with the more simple furnishings of her bedroom in town that it seemed to offer her a welcome like the vital handclasp of an old friend. A fire burning briskly in the old-fashioned black-and-white marble grate, a soft-shaded lamp on the bedside table which cast a pleasant yellow glow on an inviting array of books and magazines, and a bouquet of her favorite sunset roses on the writing-desk in the bow-windows, all gave the room the touch of home. To her dismay tears sprang into her eyes. Angrily she dashed them away.

It was enough to have the rivers of heaven pour down outside, she scolded herself furiously, without making things damp inside. Just hear that rain on the roof! It was darling of Cort—she snatched up a large, ivory-framed picture of that young man in tennis flannels and pressed it to her lips—to send her Lares and Penates to this dismal hole. And the dear flowers,—she buried her nose in the fragrant mass of yellow bloom. However had he managed it? He had probably telegraphed to the "Rosebud Shop," from New York.

The rain was still descending in torrents over her head when she settled herself at her pretty little writing-desk to describe the events of the unhappy day to Cort. "Rain-on-the-roof Cottage" she headed the letter, and for her always that was the name of her Merrivale home. But the rainstorm had passed when she slipped into bed and it was to a pitter-patter, pitter-patter, like the refrain of a lullaby, that she dropped off to sleep.

She awoke to a beautiful spring morning of fleckless blue skies and sparkling sunshine. Her spirits instantly soared like a lark on the wing as she pattered to the window to draw deep breaths of air, gloriously tonic and of a balmy warmth.

What an ugly dungeon-like old gray building housed their next door neighbor! Involuntarily she shuddered. It had such a gloomy aspect, even in the sunlight, with its setting of towering black pines — the "House of Usher" instantly slipped into her mind. She closed her eyes — it was not like Christine to let them dwell on unpleasant sights — and when she opened them, she strained them towards the west. Yes, there, off against the sky-line, were the outlines of a patch of woods. She smiled at her image in the mirror as she deftly coiled the rippling masses of red-gold hair low on her shapely young head. After breakfast she would go for a ramble with her sketch-book. This was one thing she could enjoy in this desert of a place — sketching and the woods.

She dressed with unusual dispatch, all eagerness not to waste a minute of the brilliant sunshine and the enchanting outdoor world. She was pinning on a floppy-brimmed hat while she raced down the stairs and into the dining-room. If she had not been so bent on not spending a moment longer indoors than was absolutely necessary she would have stopped to admire the quaint mahogany-paneled room, with its priceless mahogany furniture, its Dutch-blue walls and hangings, and, above all, the magnificent view of the surrounding country that each window framed. As it was, she was thankful the room was empty. She had been dreading her first breakfast with Laurie and the twins. She lingered only long enough to swallow a glass of milk and nibble a cracker, then pelted out of the front door.

Half way down the walk she stopped to look back. In the broad daylight there was, she admitted grudgingly, an air of home, a note of charm and individuality about "Rain-on-the-Roof" with its wide hospitable-looking verandas, its warm red-brown exterior, and the sweep of grounds adorned with giant trees. Christine loved trees. So now she let her eyes dwell with appreciation especially on the lovely shaped elm trees, clustered about the east veranda, with their cloudy boughs lifted to an unbroken sky.

"Spring's surely here," she thrilled with delight, when at the far end of the grounds she came upon a sheet of spring beauties which were dancing in the wind, as if sharing her gladness to be again in the sun and air. "I'm —," she interrupted herself to peep through the hedge which encompassed the Trevor grounds.

"Sounds like Daffy's voice. If it isn't the twins!

Annie shouldn't let them —" She broke off with an impatient shrug of her shoulders. When would she remember there were no more Annies nor Maries nor Wilsons in the Trevor household? Before starting on her ramble she must scold the twins roundly for leaving the grounds — those babes must remember, if they did live in Dumpville, that they were still Trevors and must uphold the dignity of their name.

"You just give me all my vi'lets, Dilly Trevor." Daffy's voice was raised in hot dispute. "Christine shan't have one of 'em. I shan't 'vide with you,"— with an angry stamp of her tiny foot. "I don't like her one wittle bit, 'n' she shan't have any of my flowers."

"All right for you, Daffy, you can't never borry my knife any more, 'n' when Laurie and I have our show in the barn you can't come, 'n' 'sides you know what you promised brother."

There was a moment of telling silence, then the weaker vessel yielded sweetly. "You can have 'em, Dilly, on'y let's take 'em to Laurie, he makes such bee-you-ti-ful bunches. You must let me put 'em in her room."

"I wish she'd hurry up 'n' be our big sister like Laurie says," said Dilly in a discouraged tone, but the next minute he brightened. "P'raps she'll be lots nicer 'cause Laurie had all her things put in her bedroom 'n' those bully flowers too."

"Huh," grunted the small maiden scornfully, "'Melia doesn't b'lieve she'll ever be a real big sister, 'n' Marie said she never saw in all her borned days a selfisher pig 'n' Christine Trevor."

Even in her anger a faint smile touched the listen-er's lips at the exact imitation of the French maid's voice and manner.

" 'N' Marie said she pities us children," the childish voice went on, plaintively. "We'll always be in her way. Oh, let's hurry, Dilly, and put just lots and lots of flowers in her room every day, so they'll change her into a big sister right away."

Christine did not stir until the small figures had turned into an opening in the shrubbery that gave upon a path leading to the barn. All the blitheness had been struck from her face. So she was the most selfish pig of a girl that Marie had ever known, and the children were to be commiserated because they had to live under the same roof with her! Selfish indeed! Had she not sacrificed her very honeymoon trip for these ungrateful children? So it was Laurie who had thoughtfully transferred her bedroom furnishings, and again it was Laurie, not Cort, who had remembered to welcome her to the new home with a nosegay of flowers. Slowly she let fall to the ground the last shred of the dainty lace-and-cambric handkerchief which she had been twisting in her fingers. A week before, if anger or emotion had got the better of her, she would have driven her motor car long and hard and fast. Now suddenly she began to run as fast as she could towards the patch of woods.

CHAPTER V

LAME DOGS AND FREDDY BLUE

Head down, Christine had sped around a corner and was pelting diagonally across the street when the warning blast of an automobile horn thrust her back to the curb. She glanced over her shoulder and promptly returned the hand-greeting of the driver. It was Dr. Denton. To her surprise he slackened speed halfway down the block, circled about and slanted to the curb where she was still standing.

"How's the girl?" His usually grave eyes were smiling boyishly into hers as he leaned out the cab window. Before she could answer, he went on rapidly, "Curious, I was thinking of you this very moment and had just decided to steal a minute and drop in at your house. I've some work for you. Two blocks down this street"— a gloved hand pointed toward her left —"and then around the corner is a girl, Fredericka Blue, who needs you."

"Needs me!" she arched her eyebrows incredulously, then shook her head. "It can't be done, Docky, I'm in bad all around this morning. I need myself. I'm on my way to the woods." Significantly she tapped her sketch-book.

"I counted on you," he said very quietly, and his car slipped off down the street.

Her eyes followed until he had swerved around the corner and was lost to her view. With a toss of her head she swung off towards the woods. Docky had been abrupt in his departure, to say the least. But then, undoubtedly he was on his way to a hurry-up call from one of his beloved poor. Involuntarily she wrinkled her pretty nose in disdain. Why would he persist in wasting his wonderful talents among the poor? Her family had been the only one of importance, that is to say of wealth, that had managed to obtain the professional attention of this young physician, who had already gained distinction by his skilful corrective surgery among the poor, but that had been due merely to his interest in the crippled boy. Yet everybody knew he could be a great bang-up doctor with a raft of money if he'd only let himself be taken up by the fashionable set. But Docky was so provokingly strange, he actually seemed to *prefer* to work among the dirty, uninteresting, diseased poor, when a world-wide reputation and riches were within his grasp.

Who was this girl, anyhow, this Fredericka Blue, who needed her? Of course, some poor cripple — Docky wouldn't be interested in anyone else. A shudder ran through her at the very thought. She wouldn't go. She was glad she had made that clear to Docky. He knew perfectly well the very sight of deformity made her ill.

When she gained the sunshine-warmed patch of woods, all about her was a tracery of delicate, misty spring colors. The soft maples along the edge of the little stream that meandered through the heart of the woods were aglow in a red mist, the willows were of an immaterial greenness, and here and there the ground was beginnng to show the blue of violets.

But Christine was too busy with unpleasant thoughts to enjoy the ever-new miracle of returning spring. She was in a fine predicament, imprisoned for two months with a family not only incapable of appreciating her high sacrifice, but even pitying themselves for having to live under the same roof. Well, if they thought her an ogress, a selfish pig, she'd live up to her reputation. She drew up her shoulders expressively. Give a dog a bad name, you know.

A little winding path had been luring her onward, and before she realized it the silence and beauty of the woods had quickened her blood and made her heart leap up. The heavy weight of torturing thoughts fell from her, and she exhaled in a sudden abandon of relief. Now and then she stopped to gaze up into a tree which was a delicate green cloud of budding leaves or to fill her young lungs exultantly with the sun-warmed air. It was all so exquisitely still, so ineffably lovely and mysterious, that she wanted to dance, not walk, from sheer delight, and for a moment or two she did fall into a little rhythmic step as light and lovely and young as the spring day itself.

Of a sudden she decided to sit on a fallen tree-trunk and sketch the alluring vista of a tree-encircled pool opening up before her. She would enclose it in her today's letter to Cort.

Tossing aside her hat, she bent her head with its sweep of smooth, gleaming gold hair to the task.

For all of ten minutes her pencil moved across the paper with quick, deft strokes, then stopped abruptly. Discontentedly she studied her effort, erased a line here, there, fell to work again, again halted, and tore the sheet into tiny bits which she gave to the wind to scatter.

Again her pencil touched the paper. This time it was no woodland scene that grew magically under her fingers but two figures, one, that of a man bending over an open case of instruments on a table, the other, of a girl in a wheelchair watching, waiting, bravely trying to hide in her twisted smile, suffering and loneliness.

The sketch wanted but the finishing strokes when Christine's pencil paused. A breath later she leaped impulsively to her feet, thrust sketch and drawing paraphernalia into the leather case, and pinning on her hat began hurriedly to retrace her steps through the woods. She didn't want to think of cripples, much less draw them.

She would find something of interest on the street to draw for Cort. She would begin her letter the instant she was in her room. Why would the thought of that bothersome girl who needed her, oppress her?

It was a morning of sunlight and pulsating life with acres of shining blue overhead, a morning for joy and light-hearted, irresponsible happiness. She didn't know or want to know Fredericka Blue. What right had she to obsess her? When she came to the corner of her street she wouldn't even move her head a fraction of an inch towards the left where Docky had motioned — two blocks down and just around the corner.

But she did. For as she sped on, her feet hardly touching the ground — Christine always moved with light, swift grace — it was as if some impulse stronger than herself made her slacken her pace at the street corner. One moment, two moments, she hesitated, then with a whimsical little smile swung deliberately past her corner, down the street, and two squares to the left.

Even before she rounded the corner, she spied it, the little white cottage with green blinds and red roof set far back among murmuring pine trees and completely separated from either neighbor by an old-fashioned, green picket-fence. Christine drew a quick breath of delight. It was like an illustration in a story book. She had no intention of entering. She would merely stroll leisurely by, or better still, she would sketch it for Cort. She would flop down under a nearby tree and —

"I'm catched," observed a little girl, who was vainly struggling to free her short skirt from the rapacious grasp of the picturesque green gate.

Involuntarily Christine stopped to stare. A pair of solemn black eyes set in a tiny elfin face stared back unsmilingly.

"Freddy says you're bound to be catched when you don't do what's right," continued the small person calmly, not ceasing her efforts to set herself free.

"That's been my experience, too," laughed Christine, as with an unusual friendly impulse she moved closer to the young prisoner. "There you are." She raised the hasp of the lock and swung open the gate. "Fate's bound to punish you if you don't behave."

"'Tain't fate — it's Freddy that punishes us Blue kiddies," confided the child, skipping a step or two in the joy of freedom. Then she craned her neck to look over her shoulder. "Skirt's tored. Um, well, I s'pose I'd better take it now,— waiting don't help a mite." This last remark she made as if to herself with a philosophical air, and marched back to the gate.

Christine chuckled at the tone of resignation. "What have you been up to?" she demanded, curiously.

"Put on my best Sunday-school dress to play in," was the prompt response, but the gravity of her manner showed she was impressed by the enormity and unusualness of the offense.

"And just what'll Freddy do to you?" queried Christine, surprised at herself for lingering to chat with a strange child, and yet, somehow, drawn undeniably to the quaint little creature.

"Freddy always lets us say what our punishment's going to be, and sometimes thinking about it is lots harder than taking it. Freddy says the punishment's got to fit the crime, and I thought and thought what it'd be all the time I was shut up by the gate, and now I know,"— with a triumphant shake of her small head.

"Yes?" Christine smiled. The engagingness of that smile encouraged the small person to slip her hand into her companion's with a perfect trust that would have won a stonier heart than Christine's.

"Please come along in while I tell Freddy. 'T ain't going to be so bad on me — it's only I'll have to stay in bed all day long in my ugliest ugly flannel nightie, when I did want to play with Kitty Brown and p'etend this beautiful dress was my worst, everyday, play-dress,— but you see, it'll be pretty hard on Freddy. She'll have to bring me my meals and everything when she's been up all night. P'raps," with an air of doubt, "I could stay in bed all day without — but, no, Freddy wouldn't let me. She'll sure bring me bread and sugar and tuck me in. You come along in while I s'plain to Freddy, and I just know, if you'll smile like you just did, she can't feel so awful bad."

Christine tried to extricate her hand, but no burr ever clung more tightly than those small fingers. Somehow, the older girl had the feeling that if she ever let her gaze meet those passionately pleading black eyes she would be lost. For a moment resolutely she kept her glance fixed on the picturesque green gate, then it wavered, and was drawn magnetically to the black eyes. Not a word was spoken. Christine let herself be led up the red-brick walk.

Before they were half way up the front steps, the door was flung open and a very tall, athletic-looking girl, with a shawl thrown carelessly over her head and shoulders, plunged out. For the moment it was clear she had eyes only for the small person. "Tommy Blue," she demanded in a deep, throaty voice, which Christine instantly pronounced charming, "I've been searching everywhere for you for the last ten minutes. Where have you been? Oh, I beg your pardon. Coming on Tommy so unexpectedly made me forget my manners. I'm so grateful to you for bringing back this small truant. Wherever did you find her?"

There followed a moment of silence. The two girls were regarding each other critically, eyes of velvety brown measuring odd, honest gray-green eyes. What they read there must have been satisfactory, for almost simultaneously their lips broke into easy smiles and a friendship was born.

"I really don't deserve your thanks," Christine smiled her magic smile, which always found its way to the heart of the recipient. "I merely opened the gate for Miss Tommy, didn't I —?"

But Miss Tommy had slipped from the detaining hand and bolted into the house.

The tall girl gazed after the vanished figure with a look in which amusement struggled with perplexity. "I must see she doesn't wake poor little Teddy,— she's just fallen asleep. Come in, won't you, please?" Then as Christine hesitated, she urged in her warm contralto, "If you only would, Miss Trevor, it would be more of a help than you can imagine."

Christine stared her astonishment.

"I've seen your picture in the society papers too often not to recognize you," laughed the girl with the strong young face and wide brows of a Luini portrait. "Besides, once you were shopping right close to me in a glove-shop, and a saleslady told me your name after you left. Do you know," she added after a moment, a wistful smile touching the corners of her lips, "I've thought and thought and thought about you ever since then, and wished I could meet you. I wondered," she ended, naively, "if some of your happiness would rub off on me."

"My happiness!" Christine ejaculated in a vibrating voice; then as she moved forward to the open door, she laughed, a laugh edged with hard notes.

She did not speak again until her companion had ushered her into a large, sun-flooded, shabby old room and settled her in a threadbare armchair that seemed to embrace her with a hospitable welcome.

"I really can't —" began Christine, as her hostess gently unpinned the hat from the smooth, gold hair, but the other interrupted with a pleading cry that seemed wrung from her heart, " Do stay. If you only knew how I need a tiny thread of your happiness this morning,"— then, with a quick return of the buoyancy that seemed to be so much a part of her, she said, " Excuse me for a minute. I must see that Teddy's sound asleep and Tommy's safe in bed, and Willy's in the back yard, and mother has her luncheon and father's music is packed, and then I'll be ready for that delicious chat I've been hoping for ever since I knew your family were coming to Merrivale." She laughed as she closed the door softly behind her. It was like a jolly boy's laugh, Christine decided, with such an infectious, mischievous chuckle in it that she smiled even at its remembered sound.

It was a full ten minutes before she came back, but for Christine the time moved with surprising swiftness. The hominess and inviting air of the shabby old room held her interest. The few well-chosen pictures, the grandmotherly chairs that fairly lured one to their depths, the worn old mahogany davenport, the rosewood center-table piled high with books and magazines, the reading lamp, the open piano with its disarray of music, the canary that swung in his cage at the window, and the gray kitten purring in a pool of sunshine on a threadbare rug near the fireplace, all contributed unmistakable proof that this was a room that was lived in, this was the center of the Blue family heart and life.

" It's about the shabbiest room I ever was in in all my life, but there is something about it that makes a perfectly at-home feeling," Christine was telling herself, when the tall girl plunged back into the room and flung herself into a corner of the davenport.

"Now, let's talk, and talk, and talk," she began, in her deep rich contralto, "and don't let's waste a second. I've fifteen whole minutes all my own before Teddy'll need her medicine. Tell me all about how happy you are. It'll be the best kind of a tonic for me this morning."

"If I ever was happy," Christine said with a reckless little catch of laughter, "it must have been centuries ago when I was young. Why, not a half hour ago up in the woods I was pitying myself for being the most abused creature on earth. But now, somehow, I don't know why, I rather fancy things won't be so bad. Perhaps," she added after a moment, in a sudden burst of candor, "I'm beginning to realize the truth about myself." She laughed again and this time in her laugh rang youth's lightheartedness. "I thought I was making a martyr of myself, and all the time it was downright selfishness."

"You selfish!" Her companion thrust her fingers through her sweep of ash-blond hair, an odd trick of hers when interested or excited. "Don't say that. I read all about how you gave up your gorgeous trip to stay home and mother your kiddie brothers and sister. You don't know how ashamed you've made me feel. I'm purple with envy of your beautiful disposition. The newspapers said your self-sacrifice was heroic."

"My beautiful disposition! My self-sacrifice heroic!" Christine repeated scornfully under her breath, then aloud: "I — I don't usually talk about myself to people I know, much less to strangers, but I can't have you believe all that newspaper nonsense. Why, I'm the selfishest girl on earth — everybody says so. Do you want to know the real reason I didn't go on that cruise?" She sat up very straight in her excitement, "I was afraid to. I knew I shouldn't be happy a minute, so — don't you see? — it was all pure selfishness. I was only thinking about myself. Besides, the two months'll soon be over. Yes, and then my postponed honeymoon —" she translated the other's questioning expression —" but what's worrying me is how'll I live two whole months in this mess of a place."

"Merrivale's a slow, sleepy little place," said the tall girl, curled up comfortably on her feet at one end of the davenport, "but when you're busy, so busy you have to tear through one thing to get time for the next, it doesn't much matter. Anyhow," she went on, musingly, "you can have your dreams, no matter where you are." A half minute later she spoke again and mischief lurked in the corners of her mouth. "Perhaps you don't know, though, Merrivale's famous for its interesting people."

"Interesting!" sniffed Christine. "I can easily imagine they're so exciting they make you jump around in circles."

"Not quite so thrilling as all that, but it isn't every little burg that can boast of a full-fledged woman-hater, and where do you suppose he lives? In that great big old dungeon next door to you. The children'd rather take a beating than go by that house after nightfall, they're so afraid of Joshua Barton. Of course, he really isn't at all fierce — just a badtempered old cripple — but I certainly don't envy Doug — that's his nephew who lives with him. Doug and I were at college together — classmates, you know, real pals,— and friends from the start." She stopped short with a sudden contraction of her brows, then went babblingly on, "I had to give up college, you know, when Teddy was born, and now Mr. Barton's made Doug stop, and go to work."

"I don't fancy Mr. Joshua Barton's going to disturb my dreams, but the nephew sounds more promising. What's his line?"

"He's a — a dreamer. I believe he could write if his uncle would let him, but Mr. Barton's all for business," the girl answered rather curtly, then went on, with a sigh, "It's a pity Mr. Barton's so — well, peculiar; with all his money he could do so much good here. If only Dr. Denton could interest him in some of the poor people around here. You know Dr. Denton, don't you? Isn't he a perfect wonder?" Enthusiasm kindled her face.

For some reason wholly inexplicable to herself, Christine could not meet the other's eyes. A bolt of fire seemed to have entered her heart, and a curious feeling of dislike for this girl swept over her. The next moment it had passed, and she was able to answer pleasantly, "Dr. Denton's cured my sore fingers and mended my broken heart ever since I was a wee girl."

"He hasn't needed to mend my broken heart yet, but he has"— with a suddenly sober expression —"helped me over the stile."

Christine looked at her in puzzlement.

"Gaze," laughed the other, and pointed to a framed sampler on the wall which bore the verse,

> "Do the work that's nearest,
> Though it irks the while,
> Helping when you meet them
> Lame dogs o'er the stile."

Christine shook her head with a whimsical little smile. "Lame dogs aren't much in my line. I always run when I see one."

"No, not really! I always thought women adored cuddling lame things."

"I'd go miles out of my way not to see a cripple or — or a blind person," Christine flashed out with such flaming intensity that her companion stared at her in open astonishment. "I can't bear to have my feelings all worked up for nothing, and besides, what's the use? There are enough people who do like to fuss over the lame and the halt and the blind. That's the real reason"— her words came in a rush —"that I didn't want to come in here. I met Docky,— Dr. Denton — and he wanted me to see a cripple, I suppose she's your sister, Fredericka Blue."

The other girl sat up suddenly and stared, then rippled out into a wave of gay laughter. "I — I beg your pardon," she gurgled, "but that's funny. Great, big, strong, healthy me, big enough for two men, a cripple! I'm Fredericka Blue, you know, but everybody calls me Freddy."

"You Fredericka Blue." stammered Christine, for once startled out of her composure. "Dr. Denton said you needed me, and of course I supposed —"

"That I must be a cripple or he wouldn't be interested in me," Freddy promptly filled in the gap. "It's my littlest sister, Teddy, who's a — she has a hip trouble, and I was up with her most of the night, and when Dr. Denton came and wanted me to get out into the sunshine, I told him I couldn't be spared, and then it suddenly popped into my mind that you could bring the sunshine to me, and so I told him just as a joke if he ran into you — he told me about your brother Laurie the other day — he should send you to me."

The silence was unbroken for a full moment, then Freddy smiled companionably. "I always tell Dr. Denton his favorite pastime's helping lame dogs over the stile, and you should hear him laugh when I say I'm the lamest dog of all, but, honestly, I don't know how I could have lived through that dreadful time without him, when Teddy was born with that hip trouble and mother's health gave out, and that meant I had to leave college. You see there are six of us girls — we all have boys' names, though; mother and father were always so disappointed we didn't turn out to be boys — and father's a dear darling, but he isn't much use where the children are concerned, he's so wrapped up in his music. Dr. Denton was the only one I could rave to when sometimes it seemed as if I just couldn't give up my dream of doing settlement work to stay home and look after father and mother and the kiddies. But my word," she interrupted herself with a spontaneous laugh, "I didn't intend to tell you the sa-a-ad story of me life. Your knowing my doctor must have loosened my tongue."

Again that bolt of fire sped through Christine and again that dislike for her companion surged through her only to vanish at her next words.

"I often wonder how many people call him that — my doctor — for that's just the way he makes you feel, all yours, his sympathy and understanding and — oh, everything."

"He's —" began Christine thoughtfully, when a loud noise behind her made her turn sharply toward the window. Two children with ear-piercing shrieks were tearing down the road. Each trailed a crutch in the dust. At their heels, shouting and screaming with laughter, raced a motley crew of boys and girls. Without a word, Christine bounded out of the open window in pursuit. The boy and the girl with the crutches were the Trevor twins.

CHAPTER VI

STOLEN CRUTCHES

One resolve gripped Christine. At the risk of life and limb, she would catch the twins before they reached Currer Road — Agnes Archer and Bess Compton often spun of a morning through this picturesque old highway, though it lured them some five miles out of their course, on their way to the Country Club. She would die of sheer mortification if —

Exactly what happened was never clear in her mind. But the next instant she had executed the running broad-jump that had won her undying fame at Warren Hall, grazed the front wheel of a curveting automobile and landed in a heap in a ditch on the opposite side of the road.

She was on her feet brushing off mud from her white sport skirt almost before the driver of the car could throw open the door to leap to the rescue.

"I do h-hope you're not hurt," he said, with a pronounced stammer that excitement made more noticeable. His voice trembled in spite of his evident struggle for self-control, and the big dark bespectacled eyes held a boy's terror.

"Not a bit," Christine promptly reassured him. She straightened up from the operation of flicking mud from her skirt-hem to find to her surprise that her eyes were almost on a level with his. "It's just that my pride tumbled into the ditch with me," with the flicker of a smile. "To think I couldn't jump that!"

He breathed a sigh of relief that was almost an explosion. "I'm m-mighty g-glad." After a moment's silence in which he stood gazing at the ground with the expression of one who longed for it to open and swallow him up, he burst out shyly, "I — where were you g-going when —? I say, you must l-let me t-take you home,— that is, if you'll t-trust my b-bad chauffing."

His humility and distress were so genuine that a warm smile puckered the corners of Christine's mouth. It really hadn't been wholly his fault. She hadn't been looking where she was going, and besides, if she hadn't been out of practice she should have cleared that ditch with ease. Of course, a more experienced driver — There was something so appealing about this slim, shy boy, probably not more than two years her senior, who stood there, a figure of despair, that she longed to comfort him.

"No damage done that can't be easily repaired," she said lightly, then an irrepressible laugh escaped. "You surely did about the best serpentine I've ever seen." Instantly her dimple disappeared at a sudden thought. "I'm forgetting I was chasing a pair of runaway twins when we — er — met," she turned her troubled gaze down the deserted street, "but they seem to have vanished completely. Perhaps you would be willing —"

But with an emphatic shake of the head he slipped his arm in hers and drew her toward the roadster. "No sir-eee. I'll t-take you home, if you p-please, but no more d-driving for me to-day. My nerves are all s-shot up. The truth is," he said, in the burst of confidence which is so often a safety-valve for a painfully shy soul, "I'm not long on machines. I g-get to thinking"— there was a prolonged pause in which he devoted his entire attention to starting the engine —"and er-dreaming, and I go moseying along, not p-paying much attention except to what's g-going on in my head, and, first thing, something breaks loose the way it did just now. Are we h-headed in the right direction for you?"

Demurely Christine named her destination. Almost at sight she had divined who her companion was. So she was not unprepared for his outburst of surprise.

"Our next-door neighbor. Whizz, what luck!" The pale, sensitive face lighted with boyish enthusiasm, but a breath later his tone had lost its joyous edge. "I'm Douglas Barton, but I don't suppose we'll get to know each other very well, though. Uncle Joshua isn't — er — fond of next-door neighbors. But I've always w-wished there was some one — y-young, you know, that I could have for a friend. Of course, there's Freddy Blue —" he paused thoughtfully, "but she's so busy, these days, somehow things don't seem the same. We used to be g-great p-pals —" He broke off to concentrate on the task of avoiding a heavy auto-truck which was coming top-speed down the road. He did not speak again until he had swerved jerkily round the corner on one wheel. Then the appearance of the grim old gray pile which had reminded Christine of the "Fall of the House of Usher" seemed to electrify him with a painful thought.

"I — I say," he threw out his hands, in a sudden helpless gesture, "I c-clean forgot."

Christine had a lurid vision of a car turned turtle over her mangled body, yet managed a calming, "It'll be worse than a case of forgetting if you don't keep your hands on the wheel. There's where I live, and, somehow, this morning I'm peculiarly anxious to get there whole."

"Yes, I know," he half groaned, "and this is w-where I l-live, and that's just it. I won't be alive when Uncle Joshua g-gets through with me. I was g-going for his crutches when we — er —"

"His crutches!" gasped the girl, with a sudden startled understanding in her eyes.

Douglas gazed at her in alarm. "You *are* hurt. You didn't know it. It's all my f-fault —"

"I'm all right," Christine hastened to assure him, with a touch of impatience. "Go on, tell me about your Uncle Joshua's crutches. He wanted you to buy him some new crutches and you forgot."

He swung the car in at the driveway of Christine's home before he explained, "I wasn't to b-buy them. It was this way. M-Mark, Uncle Joshua's m-man, 'phoned me down at Uncle's bank — I work there now"— with a smothered sigh. "I was to b-bring the c-car and chase up his crutches. Uncle Joshua was having a s-sun-bath in the garden, and when he woke up, his crutches were gone, and his favorite pair, too. I can't imagine who'd steal crutches —"

"I've a better imagination than you," Christine observed in a smothered voice, as she bounded out of the car before it had come to a full stop. "I don't fancy myself as a detective, but 'muchas gracias' for taxiing me home, and who knows, perhaps I can reward you," she went on, with her most engaging smile, "by helping you find Uncle Joshua's crutches."

But she knew she would first have to trap Daffy and Dilly before she could locate the missing crutches. Perhaps they had already come home. She would ask Laurie. He was undoubtedly in his room.

Hauntingly sweet strains of melody drew her to the living-room door. The boy was playing "Oh! That We Two were Maying." Christine well remembered that it had been a favorite with her mother. Even yet over the span of years she could hear that voice with the thrilling purity of the notes of a bird, vibrate to the dreamy pathos of

"Oh! that we two were Maying
Down the stream of the soft spring breeze;
Like children with violets playing
In the shade of the whisp'ring trees.

"Oh! that we two sat dreaming
On the sward of some sheep-trimm'd down
Watching the white mist streaming
O'er river and meadow and town.

"Oh! that we two lay sleeping
In our nest in the churchyard sod
With our limbs at rest on the quiet earth's breast,
And our souls at home with God."

She stood till the last note was gone, stirred to the depths of her being, then, with a newborn gentleness of manner, slipped into the room. Steadfastly she kept her eyes fixed on the boy's face, and for the first time she saw in that young face a fragile, delicate quality, so *spirituelle* as to grip the heart, but over and beyond that, the glow of a steady fire as of a soul triumphing over weakness of body.

"Laurie." The sound of her voice seemed to startle him from a dear dream. He turned his head slowly, a rapt expression in his great dark eyes, but his face broke delightfully into a smile at sight of her.

"Laurie," she began again. She would not let her eyes stray from his face. His body was distorted, but Docky had spoken of his beautiful soul. It was there. She could fairly see it in his face. "I want to find Daffy and Dilly. They've been getting themselves into mischief. I thought —"

Childish voices raised high in dispute made her pause on her unfinished sentence. As usual, Daffy was in the lead, when the twins, like diminutive tornadoes, tore into the living-room, and her treble was uppermost as they rushed upon Laurie.

"I saw 'em first 'n' said you was to get 'em, 'n' you just got to let me tell. Laurie, Laurie, look here." Triumphantly each twin displayed a crutch, but it was Daffy's quick tongue that tripped on, "We was playing by the barn, 'n' we saw an old ogre, over in the next yard, and what do you think, he was sleeping in the sun —"

"Just like the story you read us yesterday," Dilly cut in, but was checked by the thrust of a small elbow.

"You hush up, Dilly — you've got to let me tell —'n' I saw his crutches on a bench; you know those awful crutches in the story, Laurie, Black Temper 'n' Meanness. I spied 'em right away 'n' we went up tip-toe, tip-toe, 'n' got 'em 'n' he never woke up 'n' some bad boys 'n' girls chased us down the street 'n' we runned 'n' runned fast —"

"Down two alleys, 'n' three lots," shouted Dilly, in great excitement.

"But they never catched us," said Daffy, as she proudly waggled her blond head, disheveled and guiltless of a hat, "'n' we're glad we got the crutches, 'cause the ogre can't hurt the princess without 'em, now can he, Laurie? I —"

"O — oh," the twins shrieked in sudden dismay, and stood for the merest fraction of a second, eyes fright-rounded. At one and the same moment they had made the paralyzing discovery — Laurie was not alone. Christine was in the room. She had heard. She knew all. She would not understand. She never did. With one accord they seized each other's hands and fled, leaving their loot behind.

Laurie broke the silence that followed the banging of the door.

"They didn't mean to do wrong," he lifted eyes eloquent with entreaty. "They're the best kiddies in seven states."

It was a full half-moment before she spoke. Her mind was picturing vividly the confident clinging of Tommy Blue to her motherly sister. How differently the twins —! Impatiently she shrugged away the unpleasant thought. Crisply she flung out, "H'm, actions speak louder than words. Those twins have got to be disciplined. They've run wild so long they think their will's law. Amelia's too easy. I'm going to take them in hand, myself."

Laurie's thin hands clasped with unconscious eagerness. "If you'd only try to be interested in them just a little bit, you could do wonders. But you can't get them to do things if you're cross. I know. They'll trot their legs off for you, though, if they like you. I guess most people are like that," he wound up, with a wisdom beyond his years.

"Well, believe me, they're going to catch it for this scrape. Let me see, I'll make them —" Tommy Blue's dictum rose up suddenly in her mind; the punishment must fit the crime. "— I'll make them carry those crutches back to Mr. Barton and apologize this very instant," announced the girl, her head flung high in decision. "Where's Amelia?" she turned in the doorway. "They'll have to be made presentable first."

"Amelia had to go to town early this morning. Her brother's sick. She won't be back till night." After a moment in which his fingers picked nervously at the strings of the violin, he went on, "Please, Christine, don't row with the twins. Let me go myself next-door and take back those crutches. I'd really like to. I haven't been out to-day." He gave her a sudden smile which lit up his rather sad young face.

"That's just how those twins get spoiled. No, they must suffer the consequences of their own naughtiness." A youthful severity hardened her face. "I'll hunt them up myself."

She had already taken a half-dozen steps down the hall when suddenly she stopped, frowned, took another step or two towards the stairs, halted again, wheeled sharply about, and ran back to thrust her bright head in the living-room door and say, a bit breathlessly, "It was nice of you, Laurie, to have my fixings and those dear flowers put in my room. Thanks, awfully."

Before the startled boy could find his voice, she was pelting up the front stairs.

At the end of a long half-hour Christine had to acknowledge her defeat. She had scrupulously searched every inch of the Trevor house and grounds, but the twins had vanished completely. Her lips settled into firm lines. "Those crutches must go back now. I'll have to send our maid-of-all-work."

Involuntarily she made a little grimace as she slipped down the back stairs to the kitchen. She was treading on unfamiliar and unpleasant ground. She had small acquaintance with the kitchen, the workshop of the home. She wrinkled her nose in disgust. It would be a smelly, messy, cluttery place, but she supposed she could endure it for a moment. She was determined to send back those crutches at once.

On the threshold she paused and stared. It was like a setting for a stage-kitchen — a bright, large, cheerful room, in which every copper and tin utensil acted as a mirror for the sun. At first sight she thought that the room was deserted, but a moment later she heard some one speak from the recesses of a pantry. She took a step or two into the room, but the sounds that issued from the pantry transfixed her.

"Yes, Misery, it's your sad day, but you ain't goin' to salt the soup with tears. You promised the good doctor that, so just start to singin' again, and chase them blue devils away." Whereupon the owner of the voice began to croon a weird but not unpleasant little strain to the accompaniment of a scrubbing-brush, vigorously applied. Suddenly the singing stopped. There was silence, then the voice began again, "Now, Snubby, you get to work and dig out the dirt in that corner, yes, harder, harder than that. There, that's done. Now we'll put Sunny Face over to boil, and begin to get lunch."

The next instant a tall, lanky but still young figure, with skirts tucked up about her, and armed with pail and scrubbing brush, emerged from the pantry. As she saw Christine she dropped back a step in fright, and emitted the squawk of a frightened hen. "Gor, you gave me a turn. I didn't know anyone was here."

Her eyes were a-stream with tears but she smiled gallantly through them. "Beggin' your pardon, Miss, for them tears, but it's all on account of my babe gone a year to-day and my husband two months before that. I was havin' it out in there with Snubby" — she held out the scrubbing brush —"and maybe you heard me speakin' queerlike to it, but when you're alone so much and got nothing but thoughts for friends you like to talk to anything, so I just give everything a name and make out as they're alive. Sunny Face is one of the best friends I got," she lifted a shining copper teakettle from the stove as she spoke and proceeded to fill it with water. "You see, Miss, I gave my promise to Dr. Denton when I came to work for you," she went on, eagerly communicative, "not to let the blues get me like they used to till I most went out of my head, and I'm tryin' hard to keep my word."

"Another of Docky's lame dogs," Christine found herself mumbling; then she said aloud, "You haven't seen anything of the twins?" She asked the question with a quick realization that this young woman would be no fit messenger. "I — you — I don't believe I know your name."

"Misery," was the prompt reply,— at least that was what the girl gathered. Later she learned it was Mrs. Ray, who was the genius of the Trevor kitchen, but, to the end of the chapter, for Christine and the young Trevors, she was always "Misery."

When Christine closed the kitchen door behind her, she stopped to shake an angry fist at fate. It was perfectly clear that if the crutches were to be carried back at once, as had been her imperious dictum, she would have to take them herself. There was nothing on earth she should hate more. But for the sake of the Trevor family honor —

With one of her characteristically hasty decisions, she flew to her room to smooth her gleaming-gold hair, then properly coated and hatted, crutches under her arm, marched down the front walk to the gate and fleet-footed it into the grounds of her next-door neighbor.

The color in her cheeks was burning high, but her head was held proudly erect. She would deliver the crutches into the hands of Mr. Barton's man — he would undoubtedly answer the door. Then she would offer a cold but handsome apology for the twins' misbehavior and so the unpleasant incident would end.

She was racing along, wrapped in thought, when a harsh voice behind her suddenly challenged her. Startled, she twisted her head to glance back over her shoulder. There in the sunshine under a huge oak lay the form of a man extended in a steamer-chair. A dozen shawls and steamer-rugs bound him into the likeness of a mummy-figure.

Involuntarily Christine shuddered. It was like looking into a face carved of granite. The deep-sunken eyes were cold and hard as gray stones, the mouth was thin-lipped, sternly set; the aquiline nose was refined to sharpness, and on every feature, in every line, was stamped a deadly grimness.

" What are you doing here? " the harsh voice demanded for a second time.

The girl drew a step nearer before she answered in her sweet young voice, " I've come to return your crutches, sir. My small brother and sister made off with them. They thought it was all part of a story."

To her surprise no answer came. Then she realized that the man was staring wildly at her, his face the gray of ashes, his lips parted as if in terror. One hand crept up flutteringly. So for a full moment he stared, stared.

Suddenly he raised himself up on his elbow, and, extricating his hand with difficulty, shook a trembling fist at her. " Go, go, this instant, Christine." His voice was hoarse with passion. " Never dare to come here again."

CHAPTER VII

CALLERS

Her head proudly erect, Christine made her way down the Barton garden path. Once beyond the range of those stony eyes, however, she threw all dignity to the winds and ran at top speed. Her mind was a torrent of angry thoughts. Horrid old man! How dared he treat her, Christine Trevor, as if she were a beggar or a pedlar and order her out of his grounds! Mentally she stamped her foot. Did he for one moment suppose she had wanted to come? She wished he might have known what a terrific tussle she had had with herself before she could bring herself to deliver those wretched crutches in person.

It was not until she was racing up her own front steps that his passionate words, unbidden, repeated themselves in her mind. "Go, go, this instant, Christine. Never dare come here again." Christine indeed! Rather familiar, to put it mildly. And pray, just how had he learned her name? Her lips curved suddenly in a warm, reminiscent smile. His nephew had undoubtedly mentioned their chance meeting and had spoken her name.

She gave an expressive shrug of her shoulders as she flung into her bedroom. Joshua Barton might calm his fears. Nothing in the heavens or the earth for that matter would induce her ever to set foot again in that old ogre's grounds.

On a sudden whimsy she resolved to register her oath. Armed with sketch book and pencil, she dropped down on the window-seat, and in less than a quarter of an hour had drawn a fairly recognizable picture of the mummified figure in the steamer-chair which she had encountered on the Barton lawn.

Underneath the drawing she promptly affixed these words, "I, Christine Trevor, spinster, being of sound mind and body, do hereby solemnly swear never to speak to, look at, or have anything to do with the above monster."

She slipped the drawing into her sketch-book, and thrust it into her desk-drawer. Then, for the first time, she was attracted to the huge nosegay of wild flowers that graced her dressing-table, and the snatches of conversation of the twins which she had chanced to overhear earlier in the morning came crowding into her memory. So they were trying their honest-best to gain her love and make her a really truly sister. Her cheeks burned high with color. She would tell them and Laurie — but where were the twins?

In her anger at Joshua Barton's unceremonious dismissal she had completely forgotten those young runaways. She must hunt them up at once. But where? Perhaps they were down in the village bent on some fresh mischief which would bring new disgrace to the already tarnished name of Trevor.

Christine pulled on her hat with an impatient sigh. She was bone-tired. She wanted nothing so much as a nap and a bath before lunch. But the something which she was beginning to recognize as a force stronger than her own personal desires sent her out in pursuit of the missing twins.

Warm, weary, dishevelled, chagrined, she came back at the end of a dragging hour. Her search had been unavailing. There was nothing to do, she told herself grimly, when she found there was still no trace of them at home, but to scour the village again. She made quick work of luncheon, which she ate in solitary state.

Her cheeks flamed and her lips set, when "Misery" on her own initiative informed her that Master Laurie had eaten a bite in the kitchen a quarter of an hour before, and was again hard at work at lessons in his bedroom.

Another evidence of Laurie's thoughtfulness! He had lunched in the kitchen to spare her feelings. It had been easy enough in the other elaborate ménage of the Trevors to avoid meeting the boy at meal-times. She had been always on the wing, and on those very infrequent occasions when she had lunched or dined at home, she had been served in her sitting-room! It would be far more difficult now. With only one servant-of-all-work to assist Amelia, it was hardly to be expected that she could dine when she willed, neither would Amelia allow her beloved Laurie to frequent the kitchen. The family would have to foregather at regular hours. Again Christine gave a sigh. It would be bitter-hard, but then — From her face a sudden radiance flamed. In just fifty-nine days now she would be liberated. Cort would be back the first week in June. Her eyes grew pensive with sudden longing. It was a glorious day for a spin through the country roads. If only she had her car, or if Cort had but thought to give her the use of one of his half-dozen! Well, she would drive away her gloomy thoughts by writing Cort a long account of her eventful morning, and then she would continue her pursuit of those young will-o'-the-wisps.

Suddenly she sprang to the window. Her quick eyes had sighted a small, dark object creeping along the outer side of the hedge which separated Barton and Trevor lawns. Intently she watched a moment to make assurance doubly sure. Now she could see not only one object stealing along close to the ground, but two.

A moment afterward she had thrown open the French window and cleared the veranda in a bound that would have done credit to a boy athlete. But the two small objects must have been on the lookout for precisely such a raid, for, before Christine was half way down the lawn, they were running, fleet as two young deer, across the forbidden territory of their neighbor's lawn.

Anger burned high in Christine. This chase had gone on long enough. And when once she did catch them — ! Her lips settled into hard lines and her eyes gleamed black. She would punish them as they had never been punished before in their lives. She had just gathered herself together to vault the corner of the hedge when the honking of a familiar horn and the shouted greetings of even more familiar voices arrested her. She wheeled sharply about. But, even before she looked, she knew. The formless dread that had been lurking in the back of her mind had taken shape.

Agnes Archer and Bess Compton on their homeward way from the Country Club had swung into the Trevor drive. In a glance she saw it all,— Agnes' new roadster, the apotheosis of luxurious up-to-dateness, the smart new golf costumes of the two girls, and their finely groomed appearance. In the mental mirror of her dismay she saw herself, flushed, disheveled, in a white skirt and blouse of a past year's fashion.

But what she did not see in her mental mirror was the high lights that the sun drew from her red-gold hair, nor the flower-like beauty of her face nor the charming brightness of the smile with which she ran to welcome them, hands out-held.

"Hello, Agnes, hello, Bess. It's ripping good to see you again."

"I've just been up to the Club, getting in trim for the tournament," drawled Agnes Archer, in her fashionably high-keyed voice. She was a sallow, black-haired, black-eyed girl, still in her teens. Her lips habitually held a curve of discontent and she affected such exaggeratedly thin, silhouette lines of dress that one of her set had likened her to a hairpin slimly covered. "I say, Chris, I can't see why you cut out golf, just because you — lost your father. It's not gaiety. It's exercise and all that, you know."

A spot of red burned under her eyes, but Christine managed to answer composedly. "We're not members — now. Besides, I — I haven't the heart for it."

Bess Compton, a sunny-haired bundle of good-nature and giggles, threw herself promptly into the breach. "Come as my guest, Chris, as often as you like. Just ring me up, and I'll trundle you out whenever you say the word. Ag's right. You mustn't shut yourself up like a nun, just because your father's — gone. We all know how horribly sad things 've been for you, but, old dear, the bottom's just dropped out of things without you. Let's make it Friday at ——"

"But I expect to be very busy Friday, and, in fact, every day. There are so many things I have to put through before Cort gets back. It's less than two months now."

The significant glance that Bess and Agnes exchanged was not lost on the girl who was standing on the running-board of the roadster, but before she could challenge its meaning, Agnes had drawled out, "I say, Chris, do be a good fellow, and give us a cup of tea. There wasn't a thing fit to eat at the Club to-day, so Bess and I cut lunch, and now I'm starved."

"Me, too," Bess's tone made up in fervor for lack of grammar. "I'm hungry as a rabbit. Oh, Chris" — she gave a sudden squeal of joy —"do have Katinka make us some of those delicious scones. My mouth fairly waters for a dozen or more of those beauties."

"Katinka's also numbered among the missing," Christine announced from her perch on the running-board, as Agnes sent her car spinning up the gravel-path, "but we'll manage to scare up something for you," she declared, with more confidence than she felt. Inwardly she was filled with dismay. What could she serve her fastidious guests, especially in the absence of Amelia? Misery was willing but not efficient as a waitress, as Christine had reason to remember from her noon luncheon. As for herself, she had never prepared a dish of anything in all her life, much less served it. Wilson and Annie had always done that. She hated domestic duties. Besides, why should she, Christine Trevor, perform the work of menials?

If Amelia's brother had only chosen some other day for his illness! But she would die before she would betray by the slightest sign her mental distress.

She was chattering gaily as she led the way into the living-room. It was a large room running the entire depth of the house, and the effect of apparent irregularity in the arrangement of its fittings gave it a sense of charm. The warm afternoon sunshine streamed brightly in through the long windows and fell full upon great, cozy lounging chairs, a huge davenport, and in the center of the room upon a large, magnificently carved, old mahogany table. The appointments were practically the same as when her parents had left it years before. The sunshine rested, too, with kindly effect on the great bunches of wild flowers on mantel, table and in floor-jars and struck a note which for the first time arrested Christine's attention. There was a homelike, living quality to this old room which had been lacking in the great elaborate Trevor town-house, with its hangings of cobwebby lace and silk, its period-style furniture and priceless marbles. Christine stood a moment, staring. She wondered what it meant. But Agnes' high-pitched voice recalled her wandering thoughts.

" If you don't hurry, Chris, you'll have a couple of deaders on your hands."

" Dead ones aren't in style this year," retorted Christine, with a flashing smile that covered a quaking heart. She found the kitchen in perfect array, but deserted. There was a waste of five minutes in which she vainly searched for Misery. Her room, too, was orderly but empty. " What shall I do ? " wailed the girl to herself, as she flew down the back stairs to the kitchen. "Oh!" she cried in fright, as she pulled open the kitchen-door. "Oh, it's you, Laurie. What are you doing," she demanded, advancing a step or two into the room.

"It's almost time for 'Melia to be back, and she's sure to have a headache — trolley-riding always makes her head hurt — so I'm getting a little lunch ready," he answered, without glancing up from his task of slicing bread.

"You, fixing a lunch!" Christine's tone was a nice blending of emotion.

The boy flushed, but he replied in his quiet way, "Most boys couldn't or wouldn't, I know, but being — lame's made me different. I suppose you think I'm a sissy," he flung out, with a rare show of feeling, "but I'd be a sissy ten times over if I could do one tiny little thing for 'Melia."

"A sissy, no, rather an angel in disguise. I — you —" she stammered in unusual embarrassment, "I say, Laurie, Agnes Archer and Bess Compton are here, and they want a lunch, and I don't know a blessed thing about cooking, and could you — oh, will you help me out of my mess?"

Laurie's face was shining as he returned in an excellent imitation of Wilson's stilted manner, "What h'are your h'orders, ma'am? And w'ich service shall I use, ma'am? I do be h'arskin' your pardon, ma'am, for bein' late, ma'am, but tea'll be ready in fifteen minutes, ma'am."

Laurie was as good as his word. For a quarter of an hour, under his able direction, Christine flew about the kitchen, assembling dishes and silver on the serving-tray while the boy himself prepared the toast and brewed the tea.

"You're a perfect dear," Christine burst out, as she tossed back a tendril of golden hair from her hot cheeks; "it all looks perfectly delicious." She shouldered the tray which, in its delicate arrangement of nicely browned thin slices of bread, golden marmalade, red jelly and flashing old tea-service of silver, would not have disgraced a Wilson. "And it's every bit your work. You're not tired, I hope." A sudden pang smote her as she noted the pallor of the boy's face and the heavily shadowed eyes. "I'm a beast to let you do all this for me."

"I'm not tired," protested Laurie, stoutly. "I'm going to fix 'Melia's lunch this minute, and — and — you don't know how jolly it's been working like this with you. Oh, I say, though, you'd better hurry, or that tea'll be stone cold. 'Melia always says I make the best cup of tea ever," he added, with quaint pride.

Agnes Archer paid an unconscious tribute to the boy's skill in tea-brewing when some minutes later she passed her cup to Christine with the question, "Are you sporting a Jap chef now? That's the best cup of tea I've had since I was in Yokohama last spring, and, believe me, I know a cup of tea when it's tea. Speaking of servants, how do you like my new coiff? Marie's some jewel, Chris. You must miss her outrageously." For an instant the cold black eyes caught and held the brown eyes with the golden flecks. But Trevor pride came to Christine's support. Not by a flicker of the eyelids would she betray that the barb had pierced her to the quick.

"Oh, Marie was all right in her way," she retorted with a light laugh, "but I can't say that her absence has left me inconsolable. After all, you know, there's some fun in giving your hair the do-up you like, and not always kow-towing to Marie's taste."

"She is rather a boss," admitted Agnes, with evident reluctance, "but then she's clever and awfully useful. Oh, I say, Chris, wasn't that your twins we saw up on Carter Road? Bess and I weren't dead sure, they were so — they didn't look exactly like that good-looking painting Huntington exhibited in the gallery last year, and yet, somehow, I got the idea it was Daffy and Dilly that were making mud-pies in the road."

"I don't wonder you didn't recognize them; they must be messy as beggars by this time," Christine succeeded in keeping her tone level. "I'm taking them in tow, you see, and I'm rather green at the job."

"You," chorused her guests in shrill surprise, and burst into shriller laughter.

"Oh, I say, Chris, old dear," hooted Agnes mockingly, "is this a joke? You take care of the twins! That's the funniest ever. You could about as well teach a pair of jack-rabbits to jump through a hoop as manage a couple of kids."

An answering little gleam of humor shot into Christine's eyes. "I haven't had a whole world of experience, I admit," she replied, and to herself she confessed honestly, "nor much liking for the job either, but," she added aloud, "they've been running wild for so long now somebody's got to take them in hand, and I seem to be elected to straighten them out for Amelia, before Cort gets back."

Agnes and Bess both laughed again in good-natured derision. " You're a queer card, Chris. I'd be willing to wager," Agnes declared, with her cock-sureness of manner, " you'll be putting them in an orphan asylum before many months. Oh, there they are now," she pointed to two little figures stealing up the carriage drive.

" An orphan asylum! Never! " Christine's tone suggested that the tension of her nerves had tightened almost to the breaking-point. She threw open the French window and stepped out on the veranda, her heart heavy with misgivings. Defeat now would make her the laughing-stock of her guests, and yet how could she expect anything but defeat?

Suddenly guests, defeat, conquest, slipped completely from her thoughts. She saw only a pair of very tired, very dirty, undoubtedly very hungry, children. Her heart went out to them in a most unexpected fashion.

" Daffy, Dilly," she cried and there was something in her voice that halted their steps and made them turn their faces trustingly to hers, " come in and get cleaned up, and I'll make you —" a memory of childhood's delight gave her sudden inspiration —" the nicest tea-party you ever had. Bread and jam and sugar so high." Her fingers and thumb measured at least two inches.

" Goody, goody," shouted the young irrepressibles, as they loped like rabbits over the lawn kitchen-ward.

There was a full moment of silence when Christine stepped back into the room. Her two guests stared at her in amazement. Her face had taken on a new quality which somehow transfigured her. A peculiar light of thought was wavering in her eyes. Her shoulders were well up and she held her gold-crowned head high-poised. It was as if she had sighted a goal and was making straight for it.

Agnes broke the silence. With a slight lift of her eyebrows she observed, "We must be trailing along, Bess; I've oodles of things to do. Did you know, Chris, father and I are sailing for South America Saturday? I suppose, though, Cort's told you all about our plans?" Without pausing for an answer, she babbled on, "Cort — that is, old Mr. Van Ness wanted us to go from the start, but father couldn't get things in shape, you know, until now. So the Van Ness party have promised to postpone their trip back a month or six weeks now that we're to join them."

A month or six weeks. The middle of July or the first of August. How could she bear the strain of waiting, waiting! The minutes and hours would drag by, each more interminable than the one that had gone before. Why had Cort kept all this from her?

The world in that instant reeled about her. She felt dazed, and for the moment, robbed of the power of coherent thought. Then again Trevor pride stiffened her. She lifted her head, and her lips slowly parted in a whimsical smile. "That'll give me more time, and Heavens to Betsy, I need it. I've some hard job on my hands here, but, believe me, before I'm Mrs. Cort Van Ness, I'm going to put it through."

CHAPTER VIII

A SHORT CHAPTER — JUST A LETTER FROM CORT

Rain drumming determinedly on her windows greeted Christine the next morning. The sense of depression that her guests of the previous afternoon had left in their wake deepened at the melancholy of the day. But the handwriting on the letter that lay at her plate at the breakfast-table brought a smile into her eyes. It was from Cort. Eagerly she tore the envelope. The smile faded as she read the brief scrawl.

"Dear Girl,

"Rio Janeiro is one great place. The eats and the women are some peaches. Wish you were here. Have you heard the news? Aggie Archer and her dad are going to join us. Some business arrangements of my dad's — silver-mine or something. That means we'll not start back until some time in July, but don't you worry, honey, there's a good time coming when you're Mrs. Cort.

"Dad's shouting at me for a game of billiards — So long, my dear girl. Perhaps I'll drop you a line to-night before the ball. Big affair on here at the hotel.

"Yours for keeps,
"CORT."

CHAPTER IX

RUNAWAY TWINS

Rain was still blurring the windows and hissing sullenly on the soaked garden when Christine responded to the luncheon bell. The morning had been trying. The task she had taken upon herself already had begun to assume overwhelming proportions. The steady downpour had forced the twins to resort to the living-room as their playground, and all too soon Christine found that the streaming rain had not dampened their spirits as it had hers. On the contrary, they seemed to be keyed to the highest pitch of mischief, and now and then their shrieks of laughter would draw her irresistibly to the living-room door. Several times in her capacity as really-truly sister, she had been called in to arbitrate, and once she had rudely broken up the game when she discovered Daffy masquerading as a captive princess in a rose-colored chiffon party-gown which she had surreptitiously snatched from her sister's wardrobe.

Then Dilly had fallen from a pyramid of chairs, designed to act as an aëroplane, and in the absence of Amelia who was in the village bent upon marketing, the extremely distasteful task of binding up his wounds and assisting him into fresh garments had devolved upon Christine.

So it was with a weary sigh that the girl sank into her seat at the luncheon-table. Laurie was already in his place. His face was pale, his fingers tensely clasped in his lap. He and Christine had met for the first time at the table. The girl was too wrapped in her own melancholy thoughts to notice the boy's silent misery. Not so the twins.

"Oh — oh — Laurie, you aren't eating a speck of your salad, 'n' you always love it," presently observed sharp-eyed Daffy. "Can I —?"

"I bar half," interrupted Dilly greedily. "You —"

"I asked first. You shan't have any. It's all mine." The childish voices rose high in dispute.

"Daffy, Dilly, if you don't stop that noise this instant, I'll send you from the table," Christine reprimanded sharply. "I'm quite ashamed of you. You act like two little pigs."

There was quiet all of a moment, then tears streamed from Daffy's blue eyes with their pellucid gaze. "You're not a really-truly sister at all. You're nothing but a old cross-patch," she sobbed.

"Leave the table, Daffy," exploded Christine. All the strain and tension of the unending morning culminated in this disagreeable scene. "And stay in your room until I come."

Dilly gazed in paralyzed silence after the weeping form of his twin for one brief second, then shouting, "Laurie can't eat, 'cause you scare him into fits," he, too, fled like some wild thing from the room.

The flash of anger in Christine's eyes was replaced by a softer glow when she and Laurie were left alone. "Is that true?" she asked after a painful silence.

The boy answered without raising his eyes from his plate. "I'm not afraid of you, but I know you — you don't like to be where I — am."

The tightly closed little petals of Christine's heart quivered at the poignant grief in the boy's voice.

"Great Peter," she burst out, "I'm such a selfish thing I — I never for a moment thought how it might hurt you. I was just thinking of myself. I'm beginning to realize I'm always thinking only about myself." To her intense annoyance she could not keep her voice quite steady. "It's high time I was learning that Christine Trevor isn't the whole thing," she confided suddenly, with one of her engaging impulses, as her thoughts reverted to the letter that she had read earlier in the morning.

Laurie's face brightened and took on a smile of great charm. "You're pretty nearly the whole thing around here, and — and —" he hesitated, then ended in a rush of shyness, "it's going to be mighty jolly having you with us till Cort gets back. I suppose it's selfish of me, but I've been wishing he'd let us have you a little while longer than just a few weeks." His glance was an unconscious caress.

She rose and pushed back her chair with a short laugh, "You have your wish. Now I must settle accounts with the twins. I can see I let them off too easily yesterday."

Slowly she mounted the steps that led to the nursery. "It's beastly, everything's beastly," she declared to herself, in fierce self-pity,—"just one miserable day after the other. I'll be a gibbering idiot by the time Cort gets back. Now for Miss Daffy," she braced back her shoulders as if to prove to herself her own grim determination. "She's going to stay in bed this whole afternoon, and so is Mr. Dilly." With a firm hand she turned the door-knob. An empty room confronted her. "Daffy," she called imperiously.

No childish treble answered. She banged open Dilly's door. There was no sign of its small occupant.

"Daffy, Dilly," she raised her voice in the white heat of anger, as she raced through the hall. "Daffy," she shouted again, putting her bright head in the open doorway of the nursery.

Amelia's calm voice responded, "Isn't Daffy in her bedroom, Christine?"

"No, she isn't," snapped the girl. "But, believe me, it's going hard with Miss Daffy when I find her. I told her to stay in her room till I came. She disobeyed. I intended to keep her in bed just this afternoon. Now she'll stay there a whole week with nothing but bread and water, and—"

"Tut, tut," the old woman interrupted the angry tirade. "You can't handle children rough-like that way. They're like flowers. They've got to have lovin'— up. Pettin' and pretty words 're the same to them as God's sunshine is to flowers."

But Christine was not to be softened by Amelia's gentle philosophy.

"What those youngsters need most right now is to be made to mind. You're too easy with them. They're going to learn that when I tell them to do a thing, they've got to do it, or I'll know the reason why. It's perfectly clear you've brought them up on the theory of 'spare the rod and spoil the child.' They're spoiled all right."

Amelia answered quietly, without lifting her eyes from the small sock she was darning. "They're nothing but babes, seven year old come next January, and they've been motherless from the start and now no father, neither." A tear fell unheeded on her handiwork. "Between you and I, Christine, I think they're blessed lambs."

An uncomfortable silence fell which Christine broke with her question, "Where do you think they are, 'Melia? You don't for a minute suppose they're out in this drenching rain."

Amelia's needle plied briskly back and forth in the rent in the heel a moment before she returned, "I shouldn't be a mite surprised. You see, I came up here to get these socks mended for Dilly to put on this afternoon —"

Christine gave a cry of surprise. "You don't mean you haven't had your lunch yet?"

Amelia answered with a shake of her gray head. "I'm pretty busy these days gettin' things done. 'T ain't like it was in the old times with three maids and a laundress and what-not in the house, not to speak of Wilson. But that's nothing. I'd go without every meal if I could serve a Trevor."

Christine drew a full breath. "You're great, 'Melia. I never realized —"

"It just comes to me now," interrupted the servingwoman, "that Dilly flew in here a few minutes ago, a-lookin' for his umbrella. Like as not he and Daffy are slippin' about in puddles and Daffy not over her cold yet. If that child gets her feet wet, it'll be the death of her and her not so very strong since she came down with the whoopin' cough. I must go fetch them in this minute." She was thinking now and thinking aloud.

"You shan't stir a step till you've had your lunch," declared Christine, with the insistence characteristic of her. "I'll have Misery bring you a tray here, and I — I'll go on a still hunt for those imps myself."

"You — you, Christine!" Amelia's tone of incredulous astonishment brought a quick red into the young cheeks. "You that don't like rain no more than a kitty-cat. That's unexpected good of you. It'd save me no end of time with all that mendin' not yet done if you would, though. But don't have me no tray brought up. Mrs. Ray's up to her ears now in kitchen-work. I'll slip down for a bite as soon as I hear Laurie say his history-lesson."

Christine shivered involuntarily as she stepped out into a world prisoned in rain. It was a whirling storm, driven now and then into sheets of rain by gusts of wind which held all the fury of a winter gale. And how she abhorred darkness and rain!

A perfect wild-goose chase she told herself grumblingly, when she had raced through the grounds and barn without success. Now where? For the perceptible space of a moment she stood and surveyed the wet, deserted reaches of pavement. Then clutching her dripping umbrella with both hands to defy the assault of the wind, she marched determinedly down the street.

At the corner a furious slash of wind caught and spun her half-way about. An umbrella held shieldwise bunted her umbrella with vicious force.

"Oh," she gasped, trying to extricate her head from the ruins.

"N-now s-see what I've d-done, awkward b-brute," stammered a voice in panicky fright. "I — h-hope

I haven't h-hurt you." The troubled eyes of Douglas Barton were gazing into hers. "Oh, it's you," his face broke into a delighted smile of recognition. "Y-you'll begin to t-think I've designs on your life. This is the s-second t-time I've b-been on the r-reception c-committee to meet you."

"I'm all here," Christine laughed with a note of gaiety, "but it's a watery grave for my poor umbrella." With the straight, sure aim of a boy she tossed the broken frame into a streaming gutter. She struck the moisture from the curly tendrils of hair which strayed like wet gold from her close-fitting rain-proof hat.

"That's an o-outrage," stuttered the young man, scarlet to the eyebrows. "Y-you must t-take m-mine."

"Nothing of the kind," Christine protested vigorously. "I'm water-proof from head to foot, besides, I've no very important business, just the official tracer of runaway twins."

He gave her a rather startled look. "Do you know I had a h-hunch those kids were c-cutting. I saw them on the dead run about a half-hour ago. The little g-girl had an umbrella and the boy was d-dragging a satchel almost as big as himself. It made me think of a wretched black day centuries ago when I beat it from Uncle Joshua"—a shade of melancholy clouded his boyish face for an instant—"and the torture he put me through when I was found and brought b-back," he added, barely above his breath; then he said aloud, "That r-reminds me, I'm headed for the d-drug-store—s-some medicine for Uncle

Joshua, one of his b-bad days, you know. So, if you'll please t-take my umbrella, I'll d-duck for the street-car and —"

"Most certainly not. This rain means business. It's not going to stop. You'll be soaked to the skin" — her eyes were warm with friendliness —"and I'll not be responsible for your sudden death."

"Not much l-loss to anyone," he mumbled, with a bitterness that startled her. "Well, then, if you'll let me escort you to the d-drug-store, I can s-step into the c-car from there and land at the d-door of the bank dry as a nail, and you take the umbrella for your s-search."

So it was settled, and side by side they moved companionably under the same rain-shield down the street.

"Your car laid up?" There was mischief in the brown eyes with the dancing specks of gold.

He shook his head ruefully. "The hospitals'd be working overtime if I d-drove on a s-skiddy day like this. Some d-day I'll hurt s-somebody, and then good-bye to my ever d-driving again, Miss Trevor."

"Tommyrot! You're like all new drivers, nervous as a witch. I felt like that myself at first, but now — oh, it's easy as breathing, and the sense of power it gives you, the little thrilly feelings that run up and down your spine —" she broke off a bit tremulously. She was fairly hungry to have her hands again on the steering-wheel.

A silence was maintained for a long minute, then she started on a new tack. "I gather you told your uncle all about our little chance meeting?" The animation of curiosity was in her voice.

A slow color mounted to his forehead. "I never tell Uncle Joshua anything — personal."

Came the next question: "Then please tell me how the lamb happened to call me Christine when he so politely invited me out of his grounds?"

"No, not that!" Excitement made the umbrella wobble, and sent a rivulet trickling down the girl's neck. "He c-couldn't have been so r-rude." His voice was vibrant with feeling. "If he were younger and — and — a man"— unconsciously his hand clenched —"I'd — I'd —"

"But being something of a relative and a cripple, you can't," cut in the girl impatiently, then harked back to her question, "But how did he know my name?"

He looked at her thoughtfully without seeing her. "That's just p-part of the mystery of Uncle Joshua. He never l-leaves home. He never t-talks with anyone but his man and me, and then only when he has an order to g-give or a b-business matter to arrange, and yet now and then, it c-crops out that he knows everything that's g-going on. I — oh, I say," he interrupted himself, "if there isn't Freddy Blue."

Even while she waved a greeting to the tall, athletic-looking young woman in a shabby waterproof and cap who was swinging across the street with a big easy stride, Christine shot a glance at him. There was an indescribable something in his voice that moved her oddly. He was smiling the smile of a happy boy.

From Freddy's face, too, a sudden brightness flamed, but it had completely vanished when she halted before them.

"My usual rendezvous, the drug-store," she responded soberly to the young man's question, flourishing a bottle of medicine. "Teddy had a terror of a night." She drew a prodigiously deep breath.

Douglas made a helpless gesture. "You're w-wearing yourself to a f-frazzle. If only you'd let me —"

There was a rise of color in Freddy's cheeks as she put out her hand to silence him. There followed a moment's pause in which she looked down at him with a troubled gaze. "I must be on my way," she said, in her deep, throaty voice, and turned abruptly away.

"Want a caller?" laughed Christine, catching the other girl's hand. She had been silent since the first interchange of greetings.

Fredericka halted her steps. Her odd, honest, gray-green eyes wandered over Christine's face with a curious expression. It was as if she were trying to appraise the striking beauty which the girl carried with such perfect unconsciousness. "Yes, if you're the caller. I've still a few errands to do, but I'll be back in a half-hour. I must; I've a week's mending to do this afternoon," she ended, more to herself than the others.

"Isn't she a peach?" Christine demanded of her companion. "She's— " Something in the intentness of the gaze with which he was following that straight, hurrying figure checked her.

"Y-yes," he acquiesced, but without any fervor. "She's so c-changed though these d-days, I hardly know her. W-why, my fur and whiskers, Freddy Blue's been my stand-by ever since I was a wee t-tad. She found me at the s-station, that first day, crying like a lost soul, because Uncle Joshua'd forgotten to send for me, and, believe me, I'll never forget how that little s-strip of a g-girl mothered me, and she's been mothering ever since — That is, till a few weeks ago — and I can't t-think what under the c-canopy's got into her. Oh, I say, though, forgive me for this s-sob-story, only I just had to get it off my chest or explode."

"This is the parting of our ways." Christine eyed him thoughtfully as he prepared to leave her at the drug-store. "Perhaps some day I can solve the mystery of the change in Freddy Blue. It takes a woman to understand a woman, you know," she flung laughingly over her shoulder.

He shook his head dubiously. "They surely are b-beyond the k-ken of mere man. Sometimes I'm of the opinion that a woman doesn't understand even herself."

With this Parthian shot, and a friendly smile and lift of the hat, he left her to pursue her way.

For a half-hour or more Christine plodded up and down the streets, eyes alert for a sign of the twins. With the pertinacity that was a strong part of her nature she searched every possible and impossible avenue of escape. Then the comforting thought came that by this time they had probably sought shelter from the driving rain under Amelia's friendly wing.

As for herself, she was tired, bedraggled. She would drift into Freddy Blue's for a short gossip, then she would pull herself together for the unpleasant duty of disciplining those young offenders.

Tommy Blue answered her knock at the cottage door and in response to a polite inquiry for the oldest sister, promptly informed her with eager-eyed importance, " Freddy's gone. She won't be back for ever and ever so long."

Christine turned on her a wide-eyed stare. " Gone? Why, she said she'd be home —"

" Uh — huh, she got home and was mending away when he came and she went off in his automobile," she concluded triumphantly. It evidently was a rare event for a member of the Blue family to ride in an automobile, and Tommy appeared to bask in reflected glory.

On the sidewalk again, Christine considered the situation. What did it mean? Freddy Blue had appeared to welcome the prospect of her visit — indeed had declared that she had an entire afternoon's mending before her — and now she had slipped away on a jaunt that would last, at the least, for several hours.

Christine's mind groped for a moment, then she had it. Freddy was in love with the owner of the automobile. That would tally perfectly with her changed attitude towards her old playfellow, Douglas Barton. Poor Douglas!

Suddenly she made a sharp exclamation, and her heart beat painfully. A car was moving slowly around the corner not a dozen feet away. The man at the wheel was lowering a misty window. She caught a glimpse of the occupants of the cab.

Freddy Blue was talking with a pretty animation. Her companion's laugh rang out. Christine knew that laugh. It could always send answering bubbles of merriment along her veins. It was Dr. Denton's laugh.

CHAPTER X

THE ACCIDENT

When strongly stirred by emotion, it was Christine's first impulse to run, to run anywhere, as if to get away from herself; so now she fell into a running pace, and ran fast, but without conscious effort. Her thoughts, too, were racing riotously as she sped along through the rain. Of course, Freddy loved Docky. How could she help it? With a sudden flash of realization that it was an image of frequent recurrence, she visualized the tall figure with its fine athleticism, the deep-set gray eyes so remarkable for clarity and steadiness of gaze, the square jaw, the mobile mouth with its hint of humor.

And what a nobly proportioned woman Freddy was! Somehow, she was indissolubly associated in Christine's mind with children. There was that in the wide, candid gaze, the purity of forehead, the brooding sweetness of the face that suddenly brought to her mind the maternal tenderness of a Raphael Madonna.

But the question that teased her, the question that would not answer itself to her satisfaction was, did Dr. Denton reciprocate Freddy's love? Suppose he did? Indeed, what concern was it of hers? In a few weeks now she would be Mrs. Cortland Van Ness, the leader of the younger social set, and consequently in a wholly different sphere. She should probably never see Freddy Blue again, even if she were Dr. Denton's wife. Dr. Denton's wife! Dr. Denton's wife! Her mind caught and repeated the phrase. What a wife she would make him, what a helpmate of his joys and sorrows! What an aid in his noble work!

The thought came that her life as Cort's wife would lack the richness of experience, the rapturous heights and depths, the service of love, the inexplicable joy of giving and receiving, that would be the lot of Dr. Denton's life-partner, and she felt a thrill of pain.

She pulled herself together. Was she being disloyal even in thought to Cort? She set her teeth and with an effort banished the teasing picture of those two in the cab. Forcibly she tried to fill her mind with memories of Cort,— his handsome, gypsy face, topped by an abundance of curly black hair which she delighted to pull, the boyish roughness of his devotion, the thrilling delight of being dancing-mate to him who rivaled a professional in eccentricity and original grace. Speed the time when she should be Mrs. Cort! She would write him that very afternoon to cut his trip short — why need he wait to return by way of the yacht? — she would hold him to his promise of a middle-of-June wedding. There was nothing to keep her here. Her spirits began to soar again.

She experienced an abrupt change of mood, however, when Amelia's terror-wrung face confronted her at the entrance to the Trevor grounds. "Hain't you found them yet, neither, Christine?" she wrung her hands in distress. "Look how dark it's gettin', and those babies out in this drench. God, it'll be the death of them, and what'll I say to your mother when

I face her in heaven? I promised I'd tend up her little ones to my last breath."

Christine glanced about. She had not noticed before how swiftly the night was coming on. Already it was beginning to show black under the huge oak which afforded them a temporary shelter from the unceasing storm.

"There, there, 'Melia. You mustn't worry like that. You'll make yourself ill. I'll start out now, and hunt them up in good earnest, and I'll have them back before dinner-time." Under the stimulus of Amelia's unusual excitement, Christine took charge of the affair in a cool matter-of-fact manner which hid her growing uneasiness.

At the street-corner she stood for a moment irresolutely. Should she climb into the street-car and search for the twins in the neighborhood of the old home? While she hesitated, fate seemed to decide for her.

A street-car was bounding over the rails less than a dozen yards away. She stepped into the road. The purr of a powerful motor sounded on the rain-muffled air, and the next instant brilliant headlights blinded her and sent her scudding back on the curb. She uttered a sudden explosive "wop" as the street-car janglingly rounded the corner and sped down the track.

The motor-car suddenly slanted to the curb. "That you, Christine?" cried a voice which even in the dark instantly suffused her face with color.

"You, Docky! Oh, what luck! Could you —?"

"Hop in," he interrupted, throwing open the cab-door. "I've just come from your house. Amelia told me of the disappearance of the twins. Now, don't worry, Goldilocks; we'll have them back in no time."

She sprang into the seat beside him with a little shiver that was plainly a mixture of rapture and fear.

"If anything's happened to them, it's all my fault." She spoke with an odd, choked utterance.

"Nonsense. Children always have to have one or two experiences of running away. It's only that they chose a beastly day, and Daffy's still troubled with that cough, but we'll put her to bed and cozen her up and to-morrow morning she'll be fine as silk." He could tell from her outline as she sat with her head dropped back against the leather cushion that every faculty was strained with fright.

"You're such a comfort. I feel — better — already," she murmured, in vague response. She was wondering why she had never before noticed there was more music in his voice than in any other voice she had ever heard. "I'm calling myself all kinds of names for driving those babies out into the rain," she went on, speaking as if it were a relief to give expression to her wretched thoughts, "and just day before yesterday I was pluming myself before Agnes Archer and Bess Compton about what a success I was going to make running things here. Ag was right. The twins would be a heap better off in an orphan asylum."

From the moment he had started the motor he had been heading northward for the city. Now he was flashing his lights off and on to steer safely through a narrow way where a steep road opened up. A moment came and went before he spoke, and then it was in a tone that was tinged with whimsicality.

"An orphan asylum for the twins! You'd have to bury Amelia first, and after that you'd have me to reckon with. You know you Trevor young folks are something more to me than mere wards." He rested his ungloved hand for an instant on her fingers which lay interlaced in her lap. A curious breathlessness came over her at his touch.

"I wish," she said, a brightness leaping into her eyes at the very thought, "you were a real relative. We haven't any, you know, and sometimes I think it would be right pleasant to have some boy-cousins or a half-dozen uncles."

He switched on the dimmers as a roadster came skimming up the hill.

"I'm afraid I'm too old to be a boy-cousin, but I flatter myself I could do the rôle of the half-dozen elderly uncles."

"I didn't say elderly," she pouted. "Oh!" There was a sudden little catching in her breath, as he steered his machine through a huge stone gateway surmounted by lions couchant. "You're going here?"

"Here" was the brilliantly lighted replica of a Tudor castle that but a few weeks before had been her home.

He touched her hand again with a little wordless sound of sympathy, and again that curious thrill ran through her.

"The little beggars have probably strayed back like a couple of lost puppies to their old friend Tom." He brought the car to a standstill before the massive façade. "You know, the Wintons kept on your gardener and Wilson, in fact, pretty nearly your whole outfit."

A spasm of pain caught her heart as from her shadowy cab-corner she watched him leap up the steps. What an alluring vision of home! What memories tugged at her heart-strings! She had a deepening belief that it was all an unpleasant dream from which she should presently awake and find herself back in her exquisitely appointed room and her father would soon be stepping from his limousine and —

Her eyes held a glint of tears when Dr. Denton made his way back into the motor-car. "They're not here," he said, with his foot on the starter; "Wilson's positive they've not been anywhere around or he'd surely have heard. He was always a prime favorite with Daffy —"

A little inarticulate sound of misery escaped Christine.

"But," he went on reassuringly, "I've the best kind of a hunch they're having a high old time this very minute in Tom's cottage."

Not another word was spoken as he shot through the gate. Once on the road where Tom's cottage stood he speeded up, and on and on they went. The rain had stopped now, and the wind whistled in the gap in the wind-shield, and now and then sent a spray-like shower of muddy water into their faces.

"If only they're here," Christine prayed aloud, when the headlights flashed in a quick circle on the clumps of bushes behind which nestled the gardener's cottage.

Dr. Denton was whistling cheerfully when he came back to her. "We'll find them yet," was his answer to the questioning misery in her eyes. She shook her head with a gesture of despair, but in spite of herself, his calm certainty made a feeling of comfort pour into her heart.

"Do you know," he paused thoughtfully, one foot on the running-board, "I've a notion to run you out home, and continue the chase alone. There are — er — several places I can think of where I might find them, and —"

"The hospital —" she interrupted, divining his meaning with her quick intuition. Her lips trembled and her heart stumbled in her breast. "Not that, not that," she breathed.

"We won't even consider the possibility of the hospital right now," he spoke with an air of finality, "but they may have been picked up by a policeman and turned in to one of the station houses. I say, Christine, would you be willing to drive back?" this in an indifferent tone which something in his eyes denied. "I've had a rather full day, and I may have to operate again before midnight — a bad street-car accident out on the Morton Road."

Her face was illumined quite as though an inner flame were kindling the scarlet in her cheeks and the brightness in her eyes. "Will I? I'd — just — love — it." The words were broken by a sob of rapture.

"Fire away, then," he commanded in a matter-of-fact tone, but he, too, was shining-eyed when he slipped into the seat which she promptly vacated.

Her foot touched the starter, and away they flashed. On and on they spun through streets with sharp shadows lying across the gleaming wet stretches of asphalt, until they swerved into the Antler Road with its windings and turns that showed water and woods and hill. When she spoke it was to whisper with a little tremble in her voice, "It's perfectly thrilly. I'd forgotten it was such paradise. Oh, if I only knew the twins were safe I'd be in the seventh or eighth heaven now."

"Easy there," he said to her once when a great touring car flew past them, sheering so close that it seemed as if they must collide.

Obediently she slowed down, but soon her spirits soared dizzily again and she was racing madly ahead. She had the curious consciousness of being two distinct selves, one whose every fibre responded to the sharp sense of freedom that came in guiding the wheel in the rush through the night air, the other with every nerve tense, alert, on edge with fear of some mishap to the twins.

Overhead the wrack of clouds shifted at a sudden sweep of the winds, and a silvery moon-plaque swam into view. The road ahead turned into a solid sheet of light. To Christine the whole world seemed bathed in magic and for the moment her heart flowed quite out of her as she reveled in the feeling of swift-flying through a path of silvery silence. Then her fears fell upon her again.

"The twins were up the Carter Road yesterday. Ag Archer and Bess Compton happened on them," she ventured in a queer, tense voice, as the car slid along towards a fork in the road.

"Second turn to your left. Go easy, though; Carter Road's narrow and rutty."

Slowly the car moved forward. Both pairs of eyes were straining into the woods that lined their path on either side. Once Christine stopped the engine, and called eagerly. It was only a bush on the road's edge that had misled her. There was no answering voice, only a strange music that welled out of the night's darkness. On all sides sounded the booming of frogs from a near-by pond or marsh, and piercingly sweet the singing of the little creatures of the woods assailed their ears.

"That's Red Mill Pond," he nodded toward a small sheet of water on which the moon glancing through the pine trees cast a pale shimmer. "The next bend in the road will bring you to Overton Lane. Please turn up there. I must see Freddy Blue before I drop you off at your house."

Even while she marveled at the sweetness in his voice as he pronounced the girl's name, she was surprised at the pain in her heart. For all of a minute her vision blurred, but she managed to keep a firm hand on the wheel, and under her steady wrist the car went hurtling onward.

The little night-creatures were still piping their lays, but no longer would it have been music in her ears, had she heard them. She heard only the plaint in her own heart, "Docky loves Freddy. Docky loves Freddy."

A minute, two, three went by, then, "I do hope you're going to be very happy," she stammered with real emotion, and to her surprise her lashes grew misty with tears.

"Happy," he repeated, his lips slowly parting in an odd, whimsical smile. "Life's too full, too complex for me ever to take time to find out whether

I'm happy. But thank you, child, all the same for your wish. Yes," he mused, as though a new thought had presented itself, " a dream that's filled my waking and sleeping hours for the past year has been realized, and it's going to be a great, glorious thing," he exulted, throwing back his head, and drawing a deep breath of content, " I ought to be, I am, the happiest man in this little old world to-night."

The memory of Freddy's face as she had glimpsed it that afternoon in Dr. Denton's cab, that vivid, eager-eyed face, presented itself unbidden to Christine.

" Freddy seemed happy, too, when I saw her driving with you this afternoon," she murmured, following her own thoughts. " She has a perfectly adorable smile," she added, with apparent irrelevance.

" Freddy Blue always brings to my mind a saying of old Gautama Buddha, ' Sweeter than the scent of sandalwood is the perfume of noble acts.' "

Dimly Christine was conscious that he was saying more words in praise of his companion of the afternoon, but for a moment or two, the world grew so far away that she could neither see nor hear. She could only feel. Again came the shock of surprise at the queer pain around her own heart.

A sudden recklessness seized her. She threw the car into top speed, and in a mad haste slashed around a precipitate curve. Unexpectedly she struck a bad stretch of road which sent her skidding into deep mud. The machine slewed around. The next instant a piercing scream shattered the night-silence, and a broken body had been flung across the road.

Christine never was able to reconstruct in memory what immediately followed. All she vaguely remembered was that for a moment everything seemed to go black before her eyes, and all action of mind and body was as if paralyzed, that she sat there in frozen horror for what seemed to be the stretch of a century until Dr. Denton hurried back.

"You must help," his quiet voice seemed to come from afar off. A minute passed, another, and still she stared at him, her body stretched taut, her eyes torn open wide.

"You must help," he said again, with the same quiet voice. "It's — Daffy — that's hurt, and Dilly's lying on the roadside in a faint."

CHAPTER XI

CHRISTINE TURNS A CORNER

At midnight Christine was still sitting bolt upright in bed, staring with wide-eyes into the memory-haunted darkness. For the hundredth time, now, she was living over every detail of the accident which persistently filled her mind. She could hear the whispering of a voice, a strained, hoarse voice, not in the least like her own, "Have I — k-killed her?" She could hear the quick response gentle as a breath, "No, child, and no bones broken either." With eyes that did not see, she had watched Dr. Denton switch on the cab-light and bring out his bag, with the reiteration, "You must help." She could visualize the figure of a girl — could it have been herself? — crouching back in the cab-corner and whimpering, "No, no, Docky. I can't. I'm — afraid."

Whether he had answered, she did not know, but the next instant she had felt herself half-carried from the automobile. She could see herself moving forward on his arm like a dream-figure and then — oh, merciful Heaven — two tiny forms lay stretched out at her feet. She had a vision of herself obeying his low words of command, and presently she had found herself sitting on the muddy roadside, with Dilly's head in her lap.

Fingers — they must have been hers — were bath-ing the small cold forehead with water which her companion had snatched up in his hat from a tiny stream that came trickling out from below a huge boulder. Not a sound had broken the hush except now and then the silky wet rustle of the trees, the far-away rumble of a train, the slightly quickened breathing of the doctor who was working with cool professionalism over the prostrate little figure at the foot of a tree.

Then had come the glad moment when Dilly's eyelids had fluttered, and the golden-brown eyes, the image of her own, were wandering, wandering — up into her face. "Where's Daffy?" had been his instant demand, as he struggled into a sitting position.

"Daffy's over there with Docky. She's going to be all well —"

A torrent of sobs had interrupted her. "Go away; I don't like you. You were bad to Daffy. We runned away from you. We was going to live in a cave and be robbers only Daffy wanted to say good-bye to Laurie and —"

"Please don't, Dilly," she had broken in, on the point of tears. "No, you must stay here with me," she had tried to hold the wriggling little body. "Daffy's sick, poor little girl, you mustn't disturb her."

"I want Daffy," he had wailed, throwing all manly restraint to the wind. "I hate you. You're a bad sister. You were nasty to Daffy. She isn't dead, is she?" He sat up suddenly, stark with terror.

Christine remembered she had shivered from head to foot. "No, no, but if she's lame or something, for life, I'll never forgive myself. Oh, why, why, did I lose my head and drive like a fiend?"

Dilly's accusing finger had been pointed in her face.

"Was it you runned over Daffy? You're bad like a killer. Let me go. You're a girl what kills."

He had shaken himself free from her restraining hands, and run over to the tree beneath which lay his twin, bandaged from head to foot, but smiling weakly up into Dr. Denton's face.

"All comfortable now, kiddie?" she had heard him ask, as with infinite tenderness he stooped to lift the racked little frame in his arms.

"Goody, she isn't dead. She isn't dead," the little boy had shouted, throwing himself against the doctor in an ecstasy of tearful joy.

"Easy there, easy, Dilly," the doctor had cautioned, bearing his burden carefully in the direction of the cab. "Little sister's pretty well used up. Take big sister's hand," he had advised over his shoulder as the little boy still pressed close to his side.

"I won't, I won't." The tempestuous outburst still rang in her ears. "Daffy 'n' I hate her. We won't never speak to her again. She runned over Daffy. She's bad like a killer."

And in spite of all Dr. Denton's remonstrance and cajoling he had persisted in this attitude. Back again in the cab the doctor had been forced to guide the wheel with his right hand while Daffy lay in the hollow of his left arm. For the little girl, too, had tearfully refused to let Christine bear her weight. So they had made the strange journey slowly homeward.

Then came the memory that would burn in her brain to the end of her life. When Amelia's loving care had settled Daffy in her tiny white bed, and she had crept humbly in to make her peace, the child had screamed with terror and driven her from the room.

And every attempt she made that night to win the favor of either twin had met with the same heartbreaking rebuff.

She was slipping disconsolately down the stairs after her last vain effort when Dr. Denton stepped out of the living-room, and waited for her, one arm on the newel-post. His eyes met her mournful gaze with a deep understanding.

"Scurry off to bed, child, and get plenty of sleep. You looked fagged out."

She stood for a moment on the lowest step, then moved imperceptibly closer. "Docky, will you tell me the truth, the whole truth?" she rasped out an uncontrollable little sob, then fiercely caught control of herself. "Why doesn't anybody like me? Why haven't I any real friends? I — I never thought much about it before, and — and of course, it isn't going to spoil my young life"— with a defiant lift of the chin which her eyes instantly gainsaid —"only I've a curiosity to know."

He let his eyes wander appraisingly over her face. Her humility was genuine. The cry of anguish came from her heart.

"Goldilocks," he said as he caught her hand suddenly in a clasp of vitality and warm life, "you're on the right track. You're finding yourself, and some day —" He checked himself abruptly, only to add the next moment, "You're in no condition for a heart-to-heart talk to-night, but perhaps my old friend Emerson can answer your question more satisfactorily than I,—'To have a friend, be one.'"

She mused a moment, then drew a full breath. "Do you think that's it? You're always such an old comfort, Docky. I'm going to remember that." Over the traces of her tears her face was so irradiated with a passion of hope that it startled him. "And, as Cort says, to-morrow's always another day."

Before he could reply, she had turned and fled.

She had done her best to obey his injunction, but sleep would not come. When the small clock on her bedside table had ticked away the second hour of the morning with rhythmic precision, she was still clutching her pillow. Suddenly she sat erect again and flung back the two long golden braids that hung child-fashion over her shoulders.

She must steal to Daffy's door to make sure that Amelia had not fallen asleep. She squared her shoulders — she would not try to deceive herself. She knew perfectly, that Amelia, that most faithful watch-dog, would not close an eye the night through. She wanted to convince herself that the little girl still lived, still breathed, that she was not, in short, what Dilly had taunted her with, "a killer."

Daffy's bedroom door was closed, but a small white figure in white pyjamas lay curled up on the rug just outside the door. By the dimmed hall-light she could see that he was sleeping the sleep of exhausted childhood. Tears undried lay along his cheeks and now and then a sob escaped his parted lips. Christine stood, looking down at the sleeping boy. For some reason, inexplicable to herself, she was strangely moved. The utter childish abandon of the body, the golden hair lying in damp ringlets on his forehead like a luminous mist, the small mouth that quivered as though from a well-remembered sorrow, all seemed to draw her irresistibly. The next instant, with a sudden quickening of her heart-beats, she stooped and with a little effort gathered the sturdy young form into her arms.

Dilly stirred. His eyes fluttered open, closed again on the instant, and, with a distinctly audible "bad girl," he nestled against her shoulder, and was fast asleep. For an imperceptible fraction of a second her lips, light as a breath, touched his flushed cheek. Then she tucked him away in his bed, and with an odd lightheartedness, crept back to Daffy's room.

Amelia raised heavy eyes to the slim figure in yellow silk kimono and mules in the doorway. "She's asleep now." She got stiffly to her feet to draw a coverlet over the tiny form. "Poor babe, she's made out a poor night."

"So have you, 'Melia." Then with one of her quick decisions, "Do you know, I believe a cup of piping hot coffee'd do you good. It always made a man of me when I'd been sitting up half the night boning for a history exam. 'Melia," she went on, stamping her soft-slippered foot, "don't look at me as though I'd lost my senses. O-o-oh, I didn't wake her up, did I?" she asked, in a whisper of deepest contrition. "I — I know," she had to swallow a whole mouthful of pride, before she could bring herself to add, "I know I haven't always been as thoughtful as I should, but you — just wait and see."

With this mysterious threat she was off. A long half-hour later, she reappeared. Her cheeks were scarlet, her eyes drooping with weariness, but triumphantly she bore a steaming pot of coffee, a Sèvres cup and saucer, and a plate of buttered toast on a tray.

Now Amelia had a matchless skill in the art of coffee-making. She was a connoisseur, too, of coffee-drinking. But that night she must have been bitten by a strange desire for coffee that was anything but amber-clear, for she will tell you herself that the cup of coffee which Christine insisted on pouring with her own pretty hands was a draught fit for the gods, and that nectar — Amelia had a wide acquaintance with nectar and the gods from the myths on which Laurie fed his hungry mind — could not have brought such warmth to her heart and such strength to her tired limbs.

In the freshness of waking Christine sprang up with a song on her lips. Then she remembered. But a morning of cloudless, April-blue skies, with every bird on the wing, and the garden sweet with its promise of flowers and fruit, was not made for sadness or the gloom of repentance. So her tubbing and dressing went on with a merry whistling which now and then burst into a loud carol.

To her surprise she found the dining-room deserted, with every trace of breakfast cleared away. With the new thoughtfulness still upon her, she made her way into the kitchen. Misery was humming a quaint little cradle-song, though deep in the intricacies of bread-making. She glanced up at the girl's entrance. A smile lighted her over-thin face.

"Morning, Misery, I must have overslept. My fool-watch stopped, you see."

"Sure, you must've been dog-tired with all last night, Miss Christine," she was vigorously kneading the snowy mass of dough as she spoke, "and I says to myself, just let her sleep long as she likes and she can have her breakfast —"

"Don't bother. I'll wait on myself," interrupted Christine, with a magnanimous air.

"Of course you'll do that, Miss Christine. I was expectin' nothing else. I'm that busy with my work, and no Amelia to help, I'll be lucky to be out of the kitchen by midnight. But glad I am to do something for that blessed Amelia. She's sure been more than a sister to me since I come here, and what was we put into this world of trouble for, but to work and help others along." Under her light, deft touch there were beginning to appear from the snowy mass the outlines of a shapely loaf. "Now, ain't that the truth, Miss Christine?"

Christine made no answer. The wind had been taken out of her sails. She had expected that Misery would be overwhelmed by her generous offer to get her own breakfast. Her cool way of taking that for granted had been disconcerting, to say the least. Rather noisily she began to arrange her tray.

"I'm thinkin' now," the woman went on, skilfully transferring loaves from board to tin, "you'll be likin' to help Amelia some yourself this mornin'. Poor soul's humped up worse 'n a cripple with her rheumatiz. Small wonder, say I, routin' round yesterday in the rain after those young ones. I'm thinkin' you can make the beds."

Christine let the toast slip, butter-side down, to the floor. "Make beds! I never made a bed in all my life. Why — I — I don't know how," something in Misery's eyes made her wind up a bit shamefacedly.

"Nothing easier," was the imperturbable answer. "Besides, you've slept in a bed," this last without a hint of impertinence.

"Ye-es, but I never noticed how they're put together. At school I always paid my chum to make mine."

All unconsciously Christine was beginning to experience a changing sense of values. In the old days among her set any acquaintance with the domestic art was not only a negligible quantity but a matter of airiest contempt. Since Freddy Blue had come into her life, she was beginning to rate skill in the home a bit more highly. And here was Misery expecting her to put her shoulder to the wheel of housework when she was as colossally ignorant and inexperienced as a child. "I really couldn't make a bed to save my skin," she said, after a moment's pause.

"Well, by the time you've swallowed your breakfast, I'll have my hands clear of this, then I'll show you."

So it was Christine took her first lesson in bed-making, and that night she learned to the full the truth of the old adage, "As you make your bed, so you lie in it."

She was midway down the hall bound for Laurie's room when she heard his voice in the nursery. Her own name caught her ear.

"It wasn't Christine's fault at all. Doctor Denton told me so last night. She wasn't a bit like the bad man in the story who murdered his own little brothers and sisters, and you mustn't say it again, or think it. Besides, Daffy *is* going to get better. Now come, old fellow, drink this cup of milk."

There was a moment of silence, then a choking sound and an outburst of sobs. "I c-c-can't. It w-won't go down."

Again Laurie's gently pleading voice. "Try again, old man. It'll be easier next time. You mustn't get sick, you know. Poor 'Melia's pretty nearly down and out now, and who'll look after Daffy if she's knocked out? See, I'll hold the cup for you."

Christine realized that the little boy must have made an heroic effort to obey, for a minute after came his triumphant cry, still half a sob, "Look, look, Laurie, I'm most half done." Then with an unmistakable swagger, "Say, I'll drink ten hundred glasses of milk to help Daffy 'n' 'Melia."

That little conversation to which she had deliberately played eavesdropper gave the girl material for deep thought while she was painstakingly carrying out Misery's instructions in making Laurie's bed. How skilfully he had won over high-spirited, rebellious little Dilly! How thoughtful, how unselfish he was! It glinted through her memory now that every one who knew Laurie never failed to remark his happy spirit despite his handicap. She had never given thought to it before, but what had he to make him happy, while she who was so intensely alive, with such capacity for gladness, she who had so much, was far from happy? What was the meaning of it anyhow? Had he in his sweet unconsciousness already mastered the truth that Docky had shared with her the night before, "to have a friend, be one"? Had Laurie made his way into the hearts of all who crossed his path just by being helpful, just by being kind?

Though she did not know it then, Christine was gaining a dim vision of the great truth, that when ease and health are swept away and we are stripped to the very soul, the soul arises in triumph. She had yet to learn with her great unfed appetite for life that she would never find what she sought in a mad pursuit of happiness. It would come only in love, that magnificent and profligate outpouring of self for some one or something other than herself.

She was roused from her absorption by the sound of heavy footsteps dragging down the hall.

"Laurie," Amelia's haggard face appeared in the open doorway. "Will you — ?"

"Laurie's in the nursery with Dilly. Won't I do?"

Amelia stared. "You here! What a turn you gave me! No, I want Laurie to sit with Daffy while I fix up a dose of my medicine. She's awake now and I —"

She swayed and would have fallen, but for the strong young arm that came instantly to her support.

"Who screamed?" Misery came to the rescue as if by magic. "Don't be so frightened, Miss Christine. She ain't dead. She's just keeled over from rheumatiz. Here, you help me get her to her room. I'll have her fixed up in no time. My poor husband had them spells, too."

Some fifteen minutes later Christine closed Amelia's door behind her with an explosive sigh of relief. Amelia was resting comfortably now. Misery had ably assumed command of the situation, hers had been but the part to obey. But, somehow, she felt strangely tired. She would put on her hat, and run into the sun-steeped garden. She was slipping down the hall to her room when Amelia's words, "I want

Laurie to sit with Daffy," sprang back into her memory.

On noiseless feet she crept to the sick child's door and peered in. The little girl lay with eyes closed, her cheeks whiter than the bandages which bound her head. A great bruise marred one cheek, and her arms which lay on the coverlets were bandaged too, almost to the shoulders. Involuntarily Christine shuddered, and a strangling little sob escaped.

"'Melia," murmured Daffy sleepily, then opened wide eyes blue as the morning sky. She shrieked with sudden terror, "It's you; go away. I'm afraid, I'm afraid."

Laurie came hobbling to the door as fast as his crutches would bring him. His fine senses gauged the situation. "I'll stay with Daffy. Misery thinks 'Melia'll be all right in an hour or so."

"I was going to stay, but —" Christine shrugged her shoulders with the old air of indifference. The morning sunshine was infinitely more to her taste than sitting in a stuffy sick-room. She moved away with a springy step. Of a sudden she stopped, and bracing her shoulders with the air of one who has reached an unalterable decision, marched back. She beckoned the boy outside the door.

"Laurie," she said, with an unexpected pleading note in her voice, "tell me how to make friends with the twins."

CHAPTER XII

TANGLED THREADS

Laurie studied her a moment in silence. He smiled suddenly and with an unlooked-for brightness. "Oh, Christine, how nice!"

A swift wonder filled her that never before had she noticed his resemblance to their father. He had the same kind eyes and mouth, the same loving quality and geniality. A wild longing for her father fell upon her. She was beginning to realize what a tremendous power for good he had exerted over her in his quiet way as well as over all the others who had crossed his path. It came over her with one of her flashes of perception that he had passed on this rare gift to his crippled son.

She had to crowd her heart out of her mouth and blink a mist from her eyes before she could bring herself to speak, "It's all bunk, to give it even a thought"— her indifference was well assumed —" but it rather nettles me to have those kiddies downright hate me. Débutantes are such petted, spoiled creatures, you know. Besides," she went on, her lips tightening, "some one's got to look after Daffy now that Amelia's caved in, and the moon would be as easy to get as a nurse unless we stumble suddenly into a fortune," she added, with a glint of humor. "So, I fancy it's up to me."

"Don't forget me. I can do heaps of things. I've had time to learn them, not being a regular boy. It'll be jolly fun playing around with Daffy and Dilly."

His gallant gaiety made her throat tight again. "Yes, but there'll be other things to do, besides amusing those imps. You —"

Daffy's voice raised tearfully in protest at Laurie's prolonged absence made her swallow the rest of her sentence.

"Tell me," she caught his hand desperately, "I shan't let you go till you tell me what to do."

Laurie laughed, a jolly boy's laugh with a mischievous chuckle in it. "What did you like best in the world the winter you fell on the ice and broke your leg?"

Her face broke delightfully into a reminiscent smile. "When mother'd come in at twilight and tell me stories. But how could you know? You were too young to remember."

He flushed very red, but answered quietly, "I do remember. That was the happiest time of my life. You used to be glad when mother'd bring me and my fiddle, and we'd pretend to be some wonderful orchestra and — yes, Daffy, I'm coming this minute."

Christine stood outside Daffy's room for a long moment, her eyes staring queerly at the closed door. Her mind shuttled back and forth from that happy convalescence, well remembered now that Laurie's words had magically unlocked it from her memory, to the distress of the present situation. On a sudden impulse she crossed to a window, and stood, gazing down. The very trees seemed to be waving kindly beckoning arms. How she longed to be in their friendly companionship! How she wanted to dance to the music of their tender young leaves! She had a sudden desire to run and run and run, to go off somewhere far away into the sunlight, away from all these troubling thoughts and duties.

Instead she moved quietly to the nursery where she found Dilly plumped down on a bearskin rug, laboriously mending a broken gun for his twin.

"Go 'way, bad girl," he stormed, when he found Christine smiling down at him.

"Laurie wants you to come right away to Daffy's room. She's awake, and there's going to be some story-telling."

"O-o-oh," the word spilled over into a laugh. In a flash he was gone from the nursery and had burst like a young cyclone into his little sister's room. Christine followed with a light step, but a heart that seemed to skip beats. What if her ruse failed? Doctor Denton had urged them to use the utmost caution in keeping Daffy from undue excitement.

Dilly had left the door open. She could hear his voice blending with Daffy's weaker voice in happy chatter. Just outside the door Christine dropped to the floor on a rug and sat, hugging her knees. Then in a voice that trembled slightly in spite of her effort at self-control she began her story. Instantly the chatter ceased.

"Once upon a time," the invisible story-teller announced, "a good fairy brought twin children to earth. She gave them to kind parents who called them Daffy and Dilly."

A little cry of terror had escaped Daffy's lips at the sound of Christine's voice, but Laurie's gentle touch quieted her. Then before she realized it, she was lost in the interest of the story which Christine wove of truth and fiction with a skill that surprised herself. When the tale had come to an end with the unfortunate automobile accident of the night before and the older sister's sorrow, there was a tense moment of silence, then an eager little voice called out, "That was a lovely story. Tell 'nother."

And Christine did. This time it was a marvellous tale of two moon babies, her favorite in the long days of that convalescence which Laurie had brought to mind. That won her a reward.

"Tell 'nother," demanded Dilly, and Daffy added the invitation, issued with all the imperiousness of a royal mandate, "Sit here by me, Christie. I want to *see* you tell it."

So Christine was allowed to make her peace.

Late that afternoon when Doctor Denton visited his small patient, he stood for a moment unobserved in the doorway. He carried with him for many a day the picture that met his eyes. Daffy lay propped up among the pillows, shining-eyed, with lips parted in breathless rapture. Her twin was perched on the arm of Laurie's chair, which had been drawn close to the bedside. One arm tightly encircled his brother's neck. At the foot of the bed, Buddha-fashion, sat Christine, weaving magic spells with her newly discovered gift of story-telling.

For the perceptible space of a moment he stood and with his trained eyes surveyed the central figure. He noted the slimness of her body with its youthful, elusive charm. Somehow, the rippling masses of hair like a coil of gold at the nape of her neck, the brown eyes with the dancing specks of gold in their depths, the delicately tinted face, the simple white slip confined about the waist with a yellow ribbon, all reminded him of a rare yellow orchid.

The story came to an end with bursts of laughter from the twins and a low chuckle of delight from quiet Laurie.

"That was the nicest one yet," Dilly was still choking with laughter; "I just love to hear about those funnies."

"Tell it all over again," Daffy issued the command from her throne of pillows with something of Christine's old-time imperiousness. "Shouldn't she, Laurie."

Laurie smiled radiantly at his older sister out of the fullness of the moment. "It was a corker. But you must be too tired to tell it again. That makes five this afternoon. We mustn't be piggy-wiggies."

"I'm just a mite tired, but Docky mightn't — oh!" she was the first to notice the tall figure standing quietly in the doorway. She tumbled off the bed lightly, her eyes round with glad surprise. "What cloud did you drop from? How long have you been here? How much did you hear?"

For some reason wholly inexplicable to herself, all sense of fatigue was gone. She felt curiously lighthearted of a sudden. It seemed absurdly enough to have to do with the way his thick brown hair waved at his temples. She loved his hair.

"Just enough to know that you've a gift of the gods, a sense of humor," he answered her last question first, when he could make himself heard above the shrieks of welcome that emanated from the twins. " But I've no fancy for another patient on my hands, Miss Goldilocks." His professional eye had been quick to notice her unusual pallor and dark-circled eyes. " Take a brisk walk for a half-hour at least, while —"

" But Amelia's —" she began to protest.

" Laid up with rheumatism," he finished the sentence for her. " I was afraid of that, after her adventuring in the rain yesterday. I ran up to her room first. She's resting comfortably now, and we'll have her up good as new in a few days." He had already seated himself beside the small patient in the chair which Laurie had promptly vacated, and was skilfully manipulating the bandages on one bruised arm.

" So run along, Christine; I don't need any help, and you do need the air."

She shook her head, contradicting him with a little lift of her eyelashes, " I'm feeling fit as a fiddle, and I know I can help. Honest, Docky, I love to stay here and — oh, well, I suppose you can't help being an old bear," she submitted laughingly, to his sudden assumption of sternness. " I'll be back, though, in fifteen minutes by the clock."

With that he had to be content.

When she reached the garden, twilight was falling quickly, enfolding the earth as if with a mantle of velvet. She began to run like some wild thing up and down the paths, sniffing the fresh, sweet April air with its smell of blossoming things. Exultantly she filled her young lungs. A thrill ran through her; it was sheer joy to be alive at this "still time of the world."

A feeling swept over her that life was beginning to widen out before her and display unsuspected vistas of pleasure and pain. Her heart of a sudden grew big with wild longings for things impossible, for the edge of the skyline, for love and life and action. At the end of the grounds she caught a first glimpse of the moon, a new-born thin disk hung like some fairy-bow in the deep-blue of the heavens, and she stopped to wonder and admire.

A short, sharp bark broke the stillness. The next instant a dog wriggled his way through a gap in the hedge, and caught an edge of her gown in his mouth.

"Wrinkles, Wrinkles, s-stop that," shouted a voice which rang familiarly in her ear, and Douglas Barton cleared the hedge in a neat bound.

"Three times we've met," Christine choked on a giggle, as the young man forcibly freed her from the dog's playful grip. "Perhaps, now, the fates'll be satisfied to let the rest of our acquaintance proceed peaceably," she interrupted his stream of stammered apologies. "Do you know, I've been thinking about you, and wondering how I could return your umbrella. You remember I was not urged to repeat my call of the other day." The thought of Joshua Barton's stern dismissal suddenly crinkled the corners of her mouth and brought out a dimple. The humor of the situation had begun to appeal to her.

"I — I was w-wishing I — h-had an excuse to come over, to-night," he blurted out with native honesty, "and here's one all ready made. I'd clean forgotten about the umbrella. I — I heard about your — the accident. I met Freddy Blue," he answered the question in her eye, " just outside her g-gate. She was coming over to see you, but T-Tommy fell down the front steps and she had to g-go back and f-fix her up."

" I suppose Docky — Dr. Denton — told her," she said, more to herself than to her companion. " Things looked pretty bad last night," she went on, her voice a bit tremulous, " but everything's lovely again," she ended with a glad laugh.

" Were you having a race with yourself a few minutes ago? " he demanded, as he fell into step with her, Wrinkles meekly following at his heel.

" No, I was just pretending that the world was a great big balloon and I had it tied to a string and was running away with it." Her face sparkled with joyous mischief.

He laughed at her odd conceit. There was a definite pause before he spoke again, and then it was with a wistfulness that touched her to quick sympathy.

" I cried myself to sleep once because I couldn't have a balloon. Do you know, I've never had one. There was nobody to give me a balloon, and it's not a thing to buy for yourself."

" It's never too late. You shall have one the first time I go to town. But why were you denied just a balloon? Didn't you ever go to a circus and have your father buy you one for each hand? "

He shook his head. " Uncle Joshua doesn't believe in balloons or circuses or — anything else," he stammered, with sudden bitterness. " I'm beginning to realize I never was a l-little b-boy."

"Have you always lived with your Uncle Joshua?" Her soft voice wooed to confidence.

"Mother d-died when I came, and — and f-father — went away when I was only s-seven. He — he d-died a few m-months — after that."

She made a little wordless sound of sympathy. When she spoke it was to ask, "And are you all your family?"

He roused himself with an effort. "Uncle Joshua and I are the only ones l-left. But forgive me for t-troubling you with my t-troubles. Only to-night things somehow s-seemed to mount up. You see, Wrinkles is a *persona non grata* with Uncle Joshua," he admitted, with a wry smile, "and we left somewhat h-hurriedly after a pretty b-bad scene. Scenes rather destroy one's appetite for d-dinner, I find. I was f-feeling plagued lonesome when Wrinkles t-tackled you, Miss Trevor."

Christine came to one of her quick decisions.

"You're not going to feel lonesome while I'm your next-door neighbor." A sense of adventure and of responsibility too, came over her at her own words. "We're badly in need of an older brother. I was just thinking of advertising for one. Why don't you apply for the job?"

He stood for a moment, eyeing her thoughtfully. She, watching him, divined with her fine intuition the trend of his thought. "Your uncle has forbidden you to have anything to do with us?"

His face was rueful. "Yes," he admitted, simply.

"Must you obey?"

There was a moment of hesitation, then, with shoulders squared and head upflung, he gave her a sudden brilliant smile that lit up his sombre eyes and mournful young face. "If you really n-need me, I'll take the b-bit in my teeth, and r-run. I know it's time I did. I've known it for a while b-back b-but — b but —" he paused, and emotion augmented the stammer in his speech, "Uncle Joshua has it over me s-seven ways, and — sometime will you let me t-tell you about it?" he demanded, with a boyish impulsiveness.

"Looky here, man"— she gave him a roguish side-glance —" are you going to answer that ad in person? Well, then, one of your duties'll be to share your troubles, and, worse than that, you'll have to listen and be all sweet sympathy when I pour into your ears the sad tale of my young life. Is that a compact?"

He gripped her hand so hard that she almost cried out. "Yes, Miss Trevor."

"Miss Trevor, indeed, and that to a new-found sister! You must call me by my little name. I'm Christine."

"Well, then," he replied, with a conscious flush, "yes, Christine."

Their eyes met and they laughed together as only the young can laugh.

"I'll just dash up to the house for your umbrella, Douglas," she moved lightly away, "then I must fly back to Daffy."

"That's more like it," approved Dr. Denton, when she slipped into the sick-room with cheeks softly aglow, and eyes ashimmer. "This is going to be rather a hard pull for you, child, and you must take care of yourself."

"I'm strong as a horse. Never been sick a day in my life." She looked at him, head flung back, eyes sparkling with mischief. "I'm getting to be such a saint these days, Docky, it's positively dangerous. My wings have already begun to bud, and wings aren't in style this summer, you know."

Dr. Denton threw himself back in his chair, and let his laugh ring out unchecked. "Wings wouldn't be becoming to your style of beauty," he chuckled. "You're more girl than angel."

"Would you like me better if I were an angel-girl?" she asked teasingly, coming a step closer. He was deftly arranging Daffy's pillows.

"M-m. That's too weighty a problem for me to decide off-hand." His answer came in a bantering tone.

A sudden thought made her stare at him searchingly, then she gave a queer little laugh. "I — I almost wish I was an angel-girl like —" she bit off the rest of her sentence, and walked over to the window where she stood gazing out into the darkness, her teeth denting her lower lip.

There was perfect silence for a moment; then she wheeled sharply about. He was absorbed in making Daffy comfortable for the night. Somehow his absorption irritated her. Would he ever consider her anything but a child, to be teased and ordered about? She was certainly not more than a year younger than Freddy Blue. His voice roused her abruptly.

"Daffy's likely to have a quiet night. You can lie on the couch to be within earshot when she needs you. There's no necessity for your staying up as Amelia had to last night. To-morrow I'll make arrangements to relieve you if only for a couple of hours." With a few specific directions as to medicine and care of the small patient, he hastened away.

The room seemed curiously empty at his departure. With a shrug of the shoulders Christine tried to banish the unpleasant feeling. She would get her writing materials, and answer Cort's last scrawl which she had failed to do in the crowded events of the day. But hardly had she settled herself in the bedside chair when Daffy's faint demand for a drink of water brought her to her feet. And so it was through the long hours of the night. Restless with fever and pain the little patient developed countless needs and desires, and morning found her and her self-constituted nurse pallid even to the lips.

The morning sun was high in the heavens when at last the child fell into a heavy, dreamless sleep. Gently disengaging her hand from Daffy's, Christine crept to her room to freshen a bit before she went down to breakfast. A knock at the door startled her. Misery entered, and deposited a temptingly arranged tray on the bedside table. With a smile on her thin, homely features she proceeded to serve her young mistress.

"This is mighty good of you," Christine threw herself wearily into a chair, "with all that extra work —"

Tears sprang into the woman's eyes. "Sure, Miss Christine, it's that as makes me happy, doin' for other people, now I ain't got any of my own. But here I mustn't be talkin' about my own troubles. Dr. Denton, God bless him, 'phoned a few minutes ago as to how you was to be ready for an hour's walk soon as you had breakfast. By the time you was ready, she — I just couldn't get the name, Miss Christine — she'd be here, and when you come back, you was to nap after your bad night —"

"How did he know?" Christine demanded, with eyes bright with surprise. "He expected Daffy to have a good night and —"

The woman flushed violently. "Sure, I'm askin' your pardon, Miss Christine, but I was up and about. Amelia didn't sleep much, and I could hear you stirrin' and talkin' and tryin' to make the little one comfortable, and so I just talked to the doctor myself and —"

She scuttled away, glad of the excuse the ringing of the door-bell afforded her.

A moment later Freddy Blue hurried into the room with outstretched hands. She brought with her an atmosphere of freshness and vigor that infused new life into Christine's tired young frame.

"Through breakfast?" her rich contralto voice sang out. "Well, then, Dr. Denton's prescription for you is an hour in the sunshine, and it's some sunshine this morning." With friendly violence she proceeded to array her companion in her outer garments. "There, now, off with you."

"Everybody's so kind, but really I shouldn't —" began Christine, in weary protest.

Freddy broke in with a gusty laugh. "Oh, but you must. The doctor says so, and his word is law."

For the first time Christine lifted her eyes and looked squarely at the other. She was gloriously flushed and glad-eyed. "You — you look very happy," she brought out, with unconscious wistfulness. She shot a second glance at her, quick but appraising, taking in this time not only the shining, odd gray-green eyes, and the radiant face, but the swing of the strong shoulders, the fine length of limb, and the grace of her carriage. "Do you know, Freddy Blue, you're a perfect peach of a woman," came slowly, as if in unwilling tribute.

Freddy laughed, a big hearty laugh, and laughed again in spontaneous merriment. "Your bad night's gone to your head, childie. With me, it's always been handsome is as handsome does, and my beauty's never been one of my worries. But you're right. I'm happy, so happy I'd like to go skipping down the street like a perfectly foolish, exuberant young lamb. Just fancy me, great big me, gamboling through the village on a lamb trot." Again her laugh rang out and an answering spark awoke in the velvety brown eyes, which, however, died out at the girl's next words.

"Something so nice, so wonderful's come about I'm so stewed up inside, I'd like to shout it from the housetops, only I can't — just yet," she added, with a sudden delicious shyness. "When the time comes, tho' I want to be the one to tell you our — my secret, for you've always been my happy princess, you know."

The thought careered wildly through Christine's mind that she had already divined her secret, and there flashed back into her memory Dr. Denton's significant words of his newly gained happiness on that never-to-be-forgotten automobile ride of a few nights before.

"But I mustn't deprive you of a minute of sunshine." With smiling lips and happy, mysterious eyes, Freddy propelled her gently toward the door. "I can only be spared for a couple of hours this morning."

"I'm a selfish beast." Christine faced about from the doorway. "I quite forgot. How's Tommy?"

"Bright as a new penny this morning. But how in the name of Betsy did you know? I didn't peep about her to Dr. Denton. He's up to his eyes now in work, so I thought I could doctor her myself. He couldn't possibly have known."

Christine shook her bright head. "Douglas told me."

"Douglas? Oh!"

There was an endless moment of silence, then, in a scrupulously even tone, she went on, "Oh, yes, he was at the gate when it happened. I had forgotten you knew Mr. Barton."

CHAPTER XIII

WRINKLES

May was already ten days old, and beautiful with color and odor and bird-life, before Daffy was herself again and Amelia could hobble about. But though the days had been crowded with things that had to be done, Christine's acquaintance with her young next-door neighbor had grown apace. He had taken to vaulting the hedge at the twilight hour. And Wrinkles always accompanied him.

"I have to bring him," he had explained apologetically, on his second visit. "This is Uncle Joshua's b-bad time. I mean, his pain s-seems to attack him worst when evening's coming on, and then he always f-flies in a pretty rage if Wrinkles is anywhere about. You see," he went on, eagerly communicative, "Uncle Joshua hasn't any special f-fondness for the m-meek and m-mild, and that's where Wrinkles and I c-come in."

"Bullies never do like the people they can kick. Your Uncle Joshua's a bully." Before the other's horrified astonishment she broke into a laugh. "I'm sorry if I've hurt your feelings. I'm always saying things before I think."

A shade of boyish melancholy clouded his face for an instant. "You haven't h-hurt my feelings. I was just thinking — I — y-you know, I never thought about it before, b-but, by Pete, I b-believe you're right.

He does fancy k-kicking anybody who comes in his way, and most of all, Wrinkles and me. We're both just strays, you know. I fished Wrinkles out of an alley one night. He was s-starved and b-bruised and almost on the last gasp, and I was in pretty much the s-same healthy state when Uncle Joshua g-gathered me in after three years in an orphan asylum."

"Poor boy!" She put out her hand impulsively. Then with a sudden and alluring audacity she smiled at him. "Why don't you kick back?"

He stopped short, and looked at her in a puzzled sort of way. "Kick back! That's just it. I d-don't know how."

Her shoulders spoke volumes. "Don't be a jelly-fish, Doug. You've got to learn how."

She slipped into silence. The silence was maintained for several long endless minutes. Then he spoke in a humble tone, "I knew you'd d-despise me. I d-despise myself, but I just c-can't put up a f-fight. It isn't in me somehow. Perhaps, it's b-because I was never allowed to p-play with other youngsters, and Uncle Joshua had the spirit all b-beaten out of me when I was a little l-lad. But perhaps you're right. I've no more s-spirit than a jelly-fish."

She had been busily thinking, but his last words roused her abruptly.

"You've spoiled Uncle Joshua," she said, as she broke into sudden mirth. "You've let him have his way in everything. Now you must begin to unspoil him. You mustn't say you can't." She divined what his excuse would be. "The very next time he commands you to do or not to do something that goes against the grain, just quietly rebel."

"He'd r-raise the r-roof," the young man jolted out. His mouth was set and his eyes were frowning.

"Pouf! Suppose he did. It'd be up to him to build a new roof. And the very best thing that could happen to you, Douglas Barton, would be to bolt and let him do his building all by his lone." She went on, goaded into utter frankness. "You've never stood on your own feet. It's about time you did. Of course, being such a paragon myself"— with a little gurgle of laughter —"it's dead easy for me to preach. But," she clasped his arm with both her hands and her face shone with a sudden earnestness, "it's high time you began to live your own life and — it's high time, too, I was getting back to Daffy."

With a light "*hasta la vista*" she turned and sped up the path.

A minute came and passed, and he still stood, staring after her with unseeing eyes. He was on fire with a new thought.

The story-telling hour, which now had become a firmly established institution in the Trevor household after Daffy's afternoon nap, prolonged itself the next afternoon, so that when Christine slipped down into the garden, darkness was coming on rapidly. She was almost thrown off her feet by Wrinkle's enthusiastic reception, and his master's welcome was as warmly eager, if a bit more restrained.

"We were beginning to d-despair." He thrust his hand forth in quick greeting and falling into step, they sauntered down the garden path. "Do you know, you've grown to be the s-stuff of which my d-dreams are made."

"Oh, you poet! What news?"

"Same old g-grind at the b-bank, same old world, same old everything." He dissembled badly.

"Out with it, man. I can see it in your eyes."

"You're right. I'm b-beginning to b-believe you're always right. Well, I f-fired the first g-guns. Uncle Joshua heard me whistling for Wrinkles and r-roared out I was not to leave the house. I informed him p-politely I had a tryst with you, and he p-pawed the air and ordered me to my room. I c-consigned him quite audibly to the warm place, and put on my c-cap and went — to meet you."

"Goody-good!" Christine clapped her hands in glee. "You've made your first attack on the fortress, and, take it from me, you'll win with colors flying."

He frowned gloomily. "But I've g-got to g-go b-back and take what's c-coming."

"Stand up and take it like a man, and above all, kick back."

A spark of admiration leaped into his eyes. "You're a w-wonder. If I had you to spur me on, I might amount to s-something some day. Do you know," he asked, pausing a moment as if almost overcome by the daring of his thought, "if you'll b-back me up, some day I'll defy the old b-boy on his own ground. I'll throw up my j-job at the b-bank, and go to work at my d-dreams in dead earnest."

Her face lighted with sudden mischief. "You're coming, Doug. Uncle Joshua'll be eating out of your hand before you know it."

"If I ever amount to anything, I'll owe it all to you. You're the n-nearest approach to a —"

"Flesh and blood girl," she finished for him with a wicked little grin. "Talk of something more interesting. How's the health of your motor-car?"

"Will you go for a r-ride some evening? Of course I know about Mr. Van Ness. But he wouldn't mind me." His eyes held the unconscious wistfulness of a child.

"Oh, Cort hasn't gooseberry eyes. Besides, we agreed to give each other a long rope." An involuntary sigh rose to her lips, as with the eyes of her memory she read again the short scrawl that had come to her that morning, the first in several days. He was making full use of his long rope. "It's mighty decent of you to ask me, when you detest driving so heartily. But — er, well, yes, I'll go," she conceded handsomely.

"When?" came his instant demand.

"As soon as Daffy's all mended again. The little imp'd howl the roof down if I wasn't there for a bedtime story, but it'll be different when Amelia's on the job again. I'm getting positively round-shouldered from all my responsibilities," she declared, with a spontaneous laugh. "I'm going to roll them all in a ball, and fire it at Amelia the minute she's well."

But the very next day Christine's slender shoulders were weighted with another new duty. Intent on finding some misplaced drawing materials, she danced into the living-room after breakfast. She was half way across the floor before she noticed Laurie and Amelia in the east bow-window. There was perfect stillness for a full moment, then suddenly Laurie closed the book in his hands with a bang.

"No more history to-day, 'Melia. I just know it cramps your leg sitting so long."

"It ain't so bad as it might be," Amelia replied, gripping her hands together in spite of herself, "and it's been so long now since you did your lesson. You know you want to learn history, so you can be a big man like your father," she went on artfully, "and time's goin', sure."

"I'll never be the wonderful man father was. Why, 'Melia, he knew just everything. History's mighty interesting, though, and it'd be nice if I could learn a lot, but I won't let you help me till you're real well again."

"I used to like history. Won't I do for a tutor?"

Laurie threw a startled look over his shoulder at Christine. "I didn't hear you come in." Then, with a deep-drawn breath, he said, "I wouldn't be selfish as that," but his eyes were shining.

"Selfish! You selfish! Your name isn't Christine, is it?" she asked, with irresistible jollity. "Do you know, I'd rather fancy myself in the rôle of a tutor. Honest Injun, it'd be great sport to do my old history-teacher to the life. Miss Ogg was a real fish. Oh, I'll have to get a pair of goggles, and draw my hair down into a tight egg, and practice before the mirror saying prunes for a few hours a day. Then I'll be ready. You will take your history-lesson this afternoon, Master Laurence." She issued the command in a nasal monotone which brought a smile to her hearers' lips. "Come to my office at three."

"Really? Do you mean it?"

"Never was more in earnest in my young life."

The boy caught his breath quiveringly. His hands came together in a close clasp. "I never thought things could be so jolly," he brought out wonderingly. "With all this outdoors to look at and you."

Christine followed his gaze. His eyes were fixed on a tree close to the bow-window. It was a delicate rain of young leaves.

"I have it!" The ring of her tones was unmistakably triumphant. "We'll do our lessons out-of-doors."

And so it happened that afternoon that Joshua Barton, making his painful way down the steep flight of stone steps that led to his Japanese garden, paused on the arm of his man Mark. The scene that was being enacted in the neighboring garden arrested his eye. A pale-faced, eager-eyed boy was sitting on a rustic bench under the canopy of a huge elm. Books and papers were scattered about him. His lips were moving. His eyes were riveted on the face of a girl who was sitting crosslegged on the turf at his feet. Joshua Barton's eyes lingered for a moment on her hair. It was wonderful hair, with the gleaming smoothness of gold.

"How dare those young beggars make all that row?" he exploded, shaking a cane in the direction of the young Trevors in his passion. "Don't they know this is the hour for my nap? I'll have them —" Anger choked him, and during the rest of his progress down the steps he swore in loud impotence.

"I might move your chair to the other end of the garden," suggested Mark. "You won't be disturbed there, sir."

"Nonsense. It disturbs me even to know they're there," snorted the old man. "I know I shan't sleep a wink—curse them!"

And this ill-tempered old gentleman prophesied correctly. For though he was beyond ear-shot of the young voices, to his own angry disgust, he found his eyes wandering again and again to the boy and girl so earnestly at work. With an oath he would close his lids. Irresistibly they would fly open again, and his flaming gaze would be drawn as if by magic to those youthful figures.

Soon childish shouts broke the deep afternoon quiet. Though he willed not to look, yet he saw two small forms tear across the lawn and fairly hurtle themselves on the brother and sister. In a breath they had thrown themselves down on the ground beside the older girl, and presently quiet again descended on both gardens.

"A precious family-group," he muttered to himself. "The beggars! I'll have them strangled if they don't keep still. I'll be a complete wreck without my sleep. How can I be expected to lie here and suffer? I'll — turn them out if they make another sound."

But this threat was not fulfilled. For when the shadows were growing longer and he was at last drifting off to sleep, there came a sound which made him struggle painfully to a sitting position and brought a torrent of curses and oaths to his lips. He glared at the young Trevors. But they had no eyes, no thoughts for him. They were listening to the exquisite barcarolle which Laurie was playing for them. When it came to an end, there was a moment of perfect stillness, then again the boy drew the bow over the strings and beautiful aching chords filled the air. There was passionate grief in the music, and into Christine's mind, as she intently studied the young face, so shy and earnest, with downcast eyes shadowed by long lashes, flashed the image of a lonely soul in pain, still bound to earth.

"That was beautiful, Laurie," came her involuntary tribute. "Only it was too sad. Play something gay and bright like the sunshine."

Mischief lurked in his eyes as he tucked the fiddle under his chin. Out rang the notes of a mad dance; fast and faster it went, gathering pace, lawless, free as the air.

Christine positively gaped at him, "I didn't know you could play like that. Play it again." Impulsively she sprang to her feet, and began to improvise a dance to his music. Her whole being seemed to thrill and sway and throb to the wild harmony that flooded the air, and she danced with the grace and abandon of a gypsy. When the last faint tremor of sound died away into silence, she threw herself panting on the ground.

"I haven't had such a happy time in weeks — years, it seems," she mused aloud. "It was like being let loose from prison. I love, love, love to dance."

"You're the most beautiful dancer in the world." So unmistakably genuine was Laurie's cry of admiration that a flood of color ran up into the girl's face.

Again his bow was on the strings, and this time he played a theme delicate as a fairy-dance, and again Christine interpreted the music with eager feet. She seemed the very impersonation of youth, a flaming torch of life and happiness, as with a pent-up rapture she abandoned herself to the joy of the moment. Her dancing-figure held all the poetry, all the spirit of the new-born spring.

Laurie made a movement to lay aside his fiddle.

"'Nother one, 'nother one," chorused the insatiable twins, who always sat wide-eyed, spell-bound, before Laurie's music.

Again came a moment of utter stillness. Laurie's eyes were shadowed with dreams while he fingered the violin-strings. Of a sudden a smile came and touched the corners of his mouth, and when at last his bow swept across the fiddle, Christine had the curious feeling he was playing, not to them, but to some invisible audience. The opening chords of "Oh, That We Two were Maying," thrilled through her. Then she understood. Their mother had loved that song.

The girl's heart flowed out to the player on a wave of transcendent love, and then and there was swept away for all time her shrinking horror of the crippled body. She was suddenly snatched into a realization of the rare beauty of the boy's soul in its imperfect human case. A tenderness filled her. He was inexpressibly gentle and appealing. She wanted to protect him from every harsh wind.

As the last note floated away on the still air, a torrent of angry oaths came to her ears. The next instant the cry of a dog in pain startled her. She leaped to her feet in time to see through a gap in the hedge the crippled figure of Joshua Barton hurl a crutch at the yelping animal, then topple over on the ground.

Wildly she ran towards the prostrate form. But before she reached the edge of the Trevor grounds Mark and a Japanese house-servant were speeding from different directions over the lawn. Together they bore the silent form of their master into the "Lonely House."

"Doug won't come to-night," Christine told herself, as she strolled into the garden at the close of day.

But the thought had barely formed when he vaulted the hedge. He was alone.

"Where's Wrinkles?"

The dog's name was magic to unlock his brooding silence.

"Poor little b-beggar, half-dead. One of Uncle's pleasant little t-tantrums," he said, speaking with an odd, choked utterance. "I might as well s-shoot him —"

"Oh, no," she broke in on him, "you mustn't do that. He isn't badly hurt."

"No, only I've got to g-get rid of him, and that'd be the easiest way. I'd hate to g-give him to s-somebody who'd ill-treat him. He's an affectionate little chap."

A wish that Laurie had expressed that very afternoon flashed back into her stimulated memory, "Give him to us. Laurie — he's the crippled one, you know — is simply mad about dogs, and I know he'd love him to death."

"I'll s-send him over as s-soon as he's in b-better shape." That comprised the sum of their conversation on the subject of Wrinkles' change of masters, but Christine knew that it would go hard with him to miss the companionship of the dog.

"And how is your Uncle Joshua?" she inquired genially, after a moment's pause.

"Oh," he said, in the level tone that bespeaks a preoccupied mind, "he's in a b-beastlier temper to-night than usual."

"Did he hurt himself when he fell?"

In answer to his questioning glance she proceeded to describe the scene which she had chanced to witness.

"No harm done, except to his disposition. But Mark says he was unconscious for all of five minutes, and when he came to he raved like mad about some infernal music —"

"Nice old man," interrupted Christine, wrinkling her nose disdainfully. "Infernal music, indeed! You should just hear Laurie. He plays like a regular angel. I suppose the dear kind thing would turn us out of here if he could."

Douglas colored violently, but parried the blow with, "Let's not s-spoil our walk to-night with any more of Uncle Joshua. Let's t-talk of s-something pleasant and interesting."

Uncle Joshua, however, proved an interesting theme of conversation at the Trevor dinner-table less than a week after that. The twins were in the midst of an eager recital of how they had unwittingly disturbed his afternoon nap by falling almost simultaneously out of a gnarled old apple tree which stood on the edge of their garden.

"And you just ought to have heard what he called us." Dilly's brown eyes were round with horrified astonishment. "He's such a bad man! You ought to wash his mouth out with soap, Christine."

Daffy's eager high treble continued the story, "'N' he threw his crutches at us, 'n' said he'd put us out in the street."

"Throwing crutches seems to be about the best thing Uncle Joshua does," Christine remarked drily.

"But he couldn't put us out in the street, could he, sister?" Tears grew in the heaven-blue eyes.

"'Cause this is our house, 'n' we just couldn't live in the street," the little girl half-sobbed in her panicky fright.

"Don't be a goosie." Christine began to scold, but thought better of it, and went around the table and kissed her small sister. "He —" Soft padding steps on the veranda made her break off and wheel quickly about.

Through a French window which had been opened to the warm May air, a dog came trotting in. With an air of importance he marched up to Christine.

"Good old Wrinkles!" She stooped to pat his back. "Is this for me?" she asked, removing an envelope which he carried in his mouth. For answer, Wrinkles licked her hand with an affectionate red tongue. The note ran, "My troubles are all over. I belong to you now." It was signed Wrinkles Trevor.

Christine bent down and gathered the dog to her. Contentedly he snuggled against her shoulder. Then she deposited him in Laurie's lap. "He's all yours, Laurie. Douglas gave him to you."

For a long breathless moment the boy's eyes were raised to hers in flaming astonishment, then he buried his face in the dog's soft black coat.

To Christine's dismay two tears forced themselves between her lashes at the boy's rare show of emotion, but she managed a tremulous laugh. "It'd serve the old ogre right if we coaxed Doug away, too."

She moved closer to the window, and gazed out into the moon-silvered garden. She was not surprised to see his slim, boyish figure moving stealthily across the lawn in the tree shadows. A moment later he had leaped the hedge.

"Poor Doug! It's like tearing out a bit of his heart, I know, to give old Wrinkles up," she murmured to herself.

"If we took Doug too, poor old Mr. Barton wouldn't have anybody," Laurie said, when he could command his voice. "He'd be the lonesomest man on earth."

"Uncle Joshua lonesome!" Christine flung over her shoulder. "How could he be? You have to have a heart to feel lonesome, and he hasn't a heart, you know."

"He's a bad, bad man. He wants to throw us in the street," shrilled Daffy. She and Dilly were on their knees, worshipping at Wrinkles' shrine.

"Perhaps," began Laurie dreamily, musing aloud, "perhaps he has a heart, but it's locked up tight and no one's found the key yet." He was silent a moment, then, with his face against Wrinkles', "I say, Christie, some day let's adopt that lonesome old man."

CHAPTER XIV

AN EMPTY PURSE

On a May day of serene beauty Christine sprang from bed with soaring spirits. It was a gay, wonderful world after all. She set about dressing with a gurgle of song, stopping once to execute a mad jig, with only one slipper on, in a moment of unrestrained joy at being alive and with the sap of youth in her veins.

Her bright spirits lasted until an hour after breakfast when she came upon Amelia, bathed in tears over a high heaped basket of mending.

"It's just nothin',"— shamefacedly Amelia dried her spectacles on one pink-checked sock. "Only — only "— tears began to make their uninterrupted way again down the withered cheeks —" to think of a Trevor havin' to wear patched and darned things. Why," indignation lent passion to her voice, "here's Daffy, my baby Daffy, with the toes kicked out of her very best pair of shoes, and her others — a sight worse."

"Oh, you! Is that all? I thought your whole family had gone to the demnition bow-wows, wherever that is. Well, there are plenty of shops in this big world where you can buy socks and shoes and things, you know."

There was a strange and unpleasant silence that followed this light-hearted retort.

"It's easy enough to buy things when you have the money, but —" With nice care Amelia proceeded to select the exact shade of pink cotton from her workbasket and thread her needle.

"But — but what?" Christine demanded impatiently, already halfway out of the door. She was eager for a run in the sunshine with Wrinkles before she settled herself to her pleasant task of monogramming a bridge luncheon set.

"We haven't a charge account anywhere now," Amelia reminded her, after another silence.

"You don't have to charge them. You can buy them — pay for them outright with money, I mean."

"There's bare a few dollars left for household expenses. And the next allowance don't come till the middle of the month."

Amelia's head was bent low again over the pink-checked sock.

Christine drew in her breath. "I — I didn't realize before that we're poor, really poor," she brought out slowly. There was a pause in which her eyes were fastened on a pattern of the wallpaper. "Well, Daffy and Dilly have to have shoes, that's a cinch. Tell me their size and where you buy them. I was thinking of running up to town this morning for some shopping of my own."

The next breath she indulged in a short laugh at the open surprise in the other's face. "You aren't used to me yet in my rôle of the older sister, are you, 'Melia? It's some change, I 'fess up."

For answer Amelia caught and held her eyes. "Is it the truth, you was goin' a-shoppin' this mornin'?" Then, as the girl reddened, but gave no answer, she went on gently, "I know you haven't wanted overmuch to go to town, things bein' as they are now. Couldn't I do your shoppin' for you, and get those things for the children, and save you the — bother, Christine?"

There was a definite pause before the girl brought herself to speak. Then with her shoulders well squared and her head lifted high as an outward expression of her mood, she observed very steadily, "You're a dear, but I've got to do it, myself. If I hurry," she added, after a moment's thought, "I can catch the next car. Have the sizes and colors and things ready, I'll be on the spot in fifteen minutes." She turned and was out of the room before Amelia could reply.

When she was again poised in the doorway, the old woman's eyes showed that they found her noticeably lovely in her suit of soft black silk with the close-fitting toque and the smart suéde pumps that encased her slim feet. The wonder grew in Amelia's mind that her eyes were so curiously like deep brown velvet and her hair so luminously gold.

"Fire away, 'Melia." She drew ivory tablets from her gold mesh purse, and held a gold pencil poised with a business-like directness which, however, did not hide from the shrewd old soul the restless flicker of her eyes and the unusual ivory tint of her cheeks.

"And you'll be careful gettin' off and on the street-cars, Christine," the old woman wound up her list of directions with ill-concealed anxiety, "and most of all, look out for those awful automobiles. Sometimes I think it's better to make straight for 'em than to try and dodge 'em," she declared, in an unusual burst of communicativeness. "You honest stand a better chance of not findin' yourself mashed to death."

"I've not the slightest intention of finding myself mashed to death under an automobile. I don't fancy being killed that way. In fact, I'm rather planning to elope with some brand-new shiny machine that happens to wink its eye at me somewhere in the great wicked city." Christine broke into a laugh at the other's horrified astonishment. "But there," she gave her a reassuring pat, "don't worry your nice old head about me. I'm bound to turn up all to the good, though I warn you I'm feeling frisky this morning, and there's no telling what adventure'll swoop down on me around a corner."

Amelia looked at her queerly. "Sometimes — lately — I just don't know what to make of you. You put me so in mind of your mother with one of your pretty ways and smiles, and then —"

"And then, there's a reversion to type, and I'm the same old Christine Trevor who thinks she's the pivot of the universe," the girl came quickly to the rescue. "I'll tell you a deep-dyed, dark-purple secret, 'Melia." Her eyes flashed with roguish mischief as she lowered her voice to a stage whisper. "Sometimes I don't know myself. I've about decided I'm suffering with growing pains. But there, if you will keep chattering so, you'll make me miss the car. I've only one minute and — and twenty-three seconds to make it now." She was fairly out of the room before the last words had left her lips.

"Oh, wait," cried Amelia, bustling after her.

Christine turned impatiently. "Honestly, I haven't a second to lose —"

"Yes, yes, I know, but I — you — oh, Christine, you are goin' to — to borrow that money?"

Christine faced her trembling-voiced interrogator with a queer mixture of resentment and indulgence. "A Trevor doesn't borrow. I'm going to spend my very own money. Now, 'Melia, forget to worry till I come back."

With that, the anxious old woman had to content herself.

The street-car was already humming like a huge insect around the corner when Christine pelted down the front steps. Gathering up her silk skirts, she fleetfooted it across the lawn and landed victoriously, if a bit breathlessly, on the lower step.

To her dismay she found but one vacant seat in the car, and that did not look inviting. A fat, rosy-cheeked young woman, and a fat, rosy-cheeked, year-old boy, sprawling in her lap, left but a few inches of the seat unoccupied.

Christine's experience in street-car riding had been limited, very limited indeed. She probably could have counted the times on her fingers. For a moment she gazed about for some other place of refuge a bit expectantly. Surely some one of the dozen or more men was possessed of a spark of gallantry. But though glances of frank admiration were leveled at her, the dozen or more men remained stolidly fixed.

So after a moment in which she despairingly contemplated the swaying car-straps, she slid into the despised unoccupied few inches of space. Whereupon her young neighbor promptly welcomed her by transferring moist, pudgy fingers from his mouth to her sleeve.

"Ain't he cute?" cooed his mother, as Christine vainly tried to edge away from his damp clasp. "And that friendly, too! I declare, he'll be abdoocted away one of these fine days and me and Jim'll be held up for some big ransom like I see once a millionaire's kid in a movie."

For a full moment she was silent, while her baby-blue eyes fairly devoured every detail of her seat-mate's garb. Christine began to stir uneasily under the avid gaze.

"Say," said her neighbor, enthusiasm kindling her pudgy features, "I say, maybe you're one of them movie queens yourself. Now I come to think of it, you're the dead spit of a picture I seen some weeks back of a princess being dragged off by a rough-neck and the hero jumpin' out at him with two guns from back of a big mountain or such like. Now, I come to think of it, they call her the 'Blood-red Lily.' Ever seen it? No, you just had ought to. It's some beaut! They're showin' it this week at the Empire, right next door to my brother-in-law's pawnshop. I wouldn't miss seein' it again for worlds. That's why I got a early start this mornin', so I could do a lot of bargains and then that movie."

With convulsive gesture Christine clutched at her gold-meshed purse. It was as if she wanted to reassure herself that its contents were still there. Her eyes were gazing out of the car-window, following a road which dipped down through a fresh, green valley. But she was not seeing the road. She was seeing a tiny pair of patent-leather boots with toes kicked out.

"Where is the — the Empire?" she inquired, in a level tone designed to express preoccupation. But unconsciously she sat taut, her mind ready to register with crystal clearness every detail of her companion's answer.

"Over in the west end, in kind of a out-of-the-way place, but it's swell-lookin' when you set foot inside. You know where Thompson Street is? Well, you walk east on Thompson about six blocks, then turn to your left when you come to Blair, and go up Blair three more blocks, and there you are, on the corner of Squire. You can't miss it. It's sure some show-house and business! why, Ben — that's my brother-in-law — he says —"

What Ben, the brother-in-law, said was lost on Christine. For the next moment or two she was conscious only of the drone of the woman's voice. Her own thoughts engaged her. But presently the other's words began to hum themselves again into her inner consciousness, "And you'd find him mighty square and white if you ever come to deal with him. He ain't like most pawnbrokers, take it from me, but sho', I don't suppose a fine lady like you'd ever have to darken a pawnshop's door. Though you never can tell, so I says to Jim, and I'd do Ben a good turn any time, and if I can help drum up business —"

A sudden hysterical desire to scream, to drown out her companion's stream of words, possessed the girl. Instead, she leaned forward and pushed the button, and the next moment found herself clambering out of the car.

For a moment she stood in the road, staring bewilderedly about her. Then the warning shriek of a huge automobile truck sent her flying to the curb. From the haven of the sidewalk she tried to orient herself.

She was in the midst of a small business-section in an outlying district of the city, she promptly decided, from the curiously unfamiliar, foreign-looking names that met her eye on shop-windows and signs. But what was the name of the street? A blue and white sign posted high on a telegraph-pole on an opposite corner informed her "Thompson Street." She caught her breath in a quick little gasp. Fate had certainly jogged her elbow. For a full moment she stood irresolute, fingering her gold-woven bag. A frown came and settled itself between her brows. "I can't," she said half aloud, and wheeled sharply about. She had already taken a few steps up the first cross-street when again she stopped short. She had the look of one who was seeing with the eyes of memory. And of a truth she was. A tired old head bent low over a tiny pink-checked sock of a sudden filmed itself in her mind.

Quietly she turned back to Thompson Street, and with her shoulders and chin well up, walked rapidly down the street. With her easy, pliant gait she reached the corner of Squire and Blair in less than a quarter of an hour. Before the Empire Theatre, with its gaudy façade and still gaudier posters, she paused, and to all appearances was soon lost in admiration of the thrilling scenes from the "Blood-red Lily" so alluringly displayed on the signboards before the theatre and in the framed photographs that flanked the narrow lobby. But her mind was fretting in circles. She couldn't, she simply couldn't make her feet carry her, Christine Trevor, into a pawnshop. But Daffy and Dilly needed shoes and socks and things. A Trevor couldn't go barefoot. They were not beggars yet. She would fit them out this once, and when she was Mrs. Cortland Van Ness — Cort would never forgive her if he knew she had ever entered a pawnshop. He wouldn't understand. He was proud of her because she was — well, not unpleasant to look at and always carefully groomed and gowned, but it would detract from her worth in his eyes if she had to humble herself in this horrible fashion. He would consider that she had lost some of her attractiveness. Oh, it was out of the question. She would have to tell him, for some day he would miss her jewels. She couldn't bear the look of surprised contempt that would flash from his snapping black eyes. With Docky, now, it would be different. He would be all kind sympathy. But then, he was older. He knew people of all sorts, mostly poor ones, while Cort had never mingled except with the very rich. To him wealth with all its appurtenances was as the breath of his nostrils, his without question. She couldn't. She would tell Amelia — but the twins were in real need. She had given Amelia her promise. She could not go home empty-handed.

Her cheeks were a crimson flame and her eyes gleamed black with excitement and nervous apprehension as with a swift backward glance to assure herself that she was unobserved, she darted into Ben Arndt's pawnshop. Dimly she was conscious that a half dozen customers were already crowding the dingy, musty shop. But she was too wrapped in her own wretchedness to notice them, though one, a slatternly creature barely covered by a ragged kimono which vainly she tried to hold together, a huge black welt across her forehead, almost lurched against her in her stumbling haste to spend the coins which she held clutched in one trembling hand.

"What can I do for you, Miss?" came from somewhere out of the mental fog which enveloped her, in a metallic voice which, curiously enough, made her think of clinking coins. She found herself gazing up at a dark-faced, dark-browed man with eyes that seemed to dart everywhere. There was that in his manner which made her grasp that this was the proprietor, the mighty white, square brother-in-law, Ben Arndt.

For answer she thrust a hand into her bag, and drew out for his inspection a dinner-ring of sapphires and diamonds in the shape of a scarab, and a string of exquisitely selected pearls which matched the color of her throat.

A wild thrill of pain ran through her when her precious possessions lay in the huge, hairy hand. It was not yet too late. She could snatch them back — the ring that had been her father's last birthday gift, and the pearls that he had clasped with quiet pride around her throat the night of her débutante ball. How far away it all seemed now, the beautiful old replica of a Tudor castle dressed in its best and decked as if for a bride in rarest hot-house flowers and gay with butterflies and birds, and her own radiant self in a shimmering mass of crystal-beaded tulle over lustrous white satin! She could see herself as she had danced away from her father to a mirror. Shining-bright eyes had smiled back at her from her reflected self, as with laughing lips she had leaned forward, the better to take stock of the slim young figure with the crisp, round bare shoulders rising like a calyx from the sheath of the silver bodice, the finely molded arms in their cloud of mist, the full, delicate throat with its circlet of pearls. She could hear her own voice exclaim with rapture, "Why, father, I don't look half bad to-night," and his broken rejoinder, "You were never more like your beautiful mother."

Suddenly the picture blurred. The metallic voice of the pawnbroker was suavely demanding, "What do you want on 'em, lady?"

Christine stared for a breath with puzzled, unseeing eyes, then with a rush came back to herself, "Oh, yes, money, you mean. Please give me just the very most you can."

Out in the street again she filled her lungs exultantly with a deep breath of the sun-warmed air, as she crammed a white ticket and a roll of bills, smaller by a third for her inexperience, into her purse. She had "put over" the horrid business, and now she could lose herself in the delights of shopping. And lose herself she did for the next two hours.

Christine always had a fondness for "purple and fine linen," so with her old-time superb disregard for such mundane trifles as the cost of things, she plunged into one of the most exclusive of the city stores. For a time she bought lavishly, recklessly, to the silent admiration of the young saleswomen who had served her so often in the golden past. When the hour of reckoning came, however, she found to her dismay that only one limp two-dollar bill was tucked away in the recesses of her purse, and there were several items still to be checked off her list, and as yet she had not lunched. For a moment, but only for a moment, she hesitated, then with smiling lips asked for a volume of historical tales that she knew Laurie had been secretly craving. She would "do up brown" the rôle of elder sister. When the book had been added to her purchases, the tiny, diamond monogrammed coin-purse which nestled in the shimmering bag boasted of but one coin — a fifty-cent piece.

As she emerged from the revolving doors she paused for the fraction of a breath. Her perfectly healthy young appetite was asserting itself determinedly. Should she stay herself somewhere on a sandwich and a cup of tea, or make at once for home? Then what she had been dreading in the hinterland of her mind all during this glorious frenzy of shopping came to pass.

A head of over-yellow hair draped beneath a hat brimming with violets was leaning from a window of an opulent limousine drawn up at the curb, and over-carmined lips were speaking her name.

"Christine Trevor, oh, Christine!" With a hand delicately gloved in lavender Mrs. Potts was beckoning her effusively.

Reluctantly Christine advanced. Mrs. Potts had never been a favorite with her, though once or twice she had perforce accepted that matron's lavish hospitality with which she had sought to court the favor of the season's débutantes.

In a city where of late millionaires sprang up overnight like some mushroom growth, the George Pottses were the newest of the newly rich. Their wealth had come like a fabulous golden shower from the invention of an automobile engine, and in their dazed wonder at their Midas touch, they had transformed only the outer shell. To her still clung the aroma of the waitress she had been less than a decade before and he had not changed a whit from loud-mouthed, coarse-spoken, good-natured George Potts, the machinist.

"Awf'ly glad to see you again. Naughty girl not to let your friends get even a peek at you. You weren't home when Harriet Randall and I drove out all that way just a purpose to call on you. But there, I don't know as I much blame you for not wantin' to gallivant for a while, seein' what a stroke of bad luck you had. Doin' up the town for the day? Can't I give you a lift?" Mrs. Potts concluded shrilly, one hand toying ostentatiously with a lorgnette chain of massive amethysts and pearls which accentuated the striking violet note of her costume.

"No, thank you just the same." Christine managed to smile pleasantly. "I'm on my way home. I've been playing Santa Claus —"

"We'll miss you at the Ashbys' dinner-dance to-night. Things don't seem to move like they did when you were our queen bee. But it won't be long now before you'll be comin' back to us again. Thank glory, — people in mournin' don't stay out of things long like they used.

"Well, but I am all agog over that shindig to-night, and, believe me, I'll be in the bald-headed row to get a good squint at that wonderful Carlina. Of course, you know they hooked her and her chorus to open up their Roman — or is it Greek? — theatre. Too bad you can't see her. You're such a crack dancer yourself. We're goin' to set up some such joint ourselves in that new piece of land we've bought next to our grounds. Dearie me, I must be off," with a glance at her tiny diamond-encrusted wrist watch, "I promised to pick up Georgia Crane and Harriet Randall on my way to the Club. Hope you'll be home next time when I rumble out to see you." With another wave of the hand Mrs. Potts dismissed Christine.

The girl followed the departing limousine with amused eyes. What an impossible woman she was! How she had beamed when she mentioned her newly won acquaintance with the Ashbys whose aristocratic citadel everyone knew George Potts had strategically assailed by a brilliant business maneuver.

Of course she, Christine, had known the Ashbys were giving one of their famous dinner-dances that night, for Mrs. Ashby had written her the friendliest note in the world but a fortnight before to tell her what a break in their inner circle she was making by her absence from the opening of the Greek theatre, the plans for which they had so often discussed.

The note had told her, too, that Carlina, that bright, particular star who had danced her way into the hearts of two continents, had condescended to appear.

For months now it had been Christine's dearest desire to see her. Cort had offered that as one of the delights of their New York flitting.

How often she herself had been the pivot of the Ashby gaieties, and to-night she could not be there, could not, for even were she back once more in the round of social life, there was the all-important item of gowns and jewels and motor-cars which now — her lips settled into a straight line; once let her be Mrs. Cortland Van Ness and there would be no such problems.

She shrugged her way back to realities. She had more important matters to put through for the present. In the first instance she was hungry. For a moment she dallied with the temptation of fancying herself in the peacock room of the club. Rudolph would smile his brightest as he adjusted her chair, and served her with his best. He had always been her ready slave. He would whisper deferentially, " Some exqueesite truffles to-day, Mees Trevor, and —"

There would be no truffles for her that day, nor for many days to come. The most her one small coin could command with car-fare to consider was a sandwich and a cup of tea, and that in some cheap, out-of-the-way corner.

At the end of the second block she found her cheap, out-of-the-way corner. It was a snowy-tiled serve-self. For a moment she hesitated. It looked clean, but of course the food would be execrable and the place would overflow with sweaty-browed working-men and women. She would climb into the car — Her wrist-watch warned her that the next suburban car was not due for a full half-hour, and she was fairly famished. But she could never eat among the hoi-polloi in a serve-self. She must —

A girl in a cheap but smart black silk suit and tailor hat pressed past, and, her hand on the restaurant door, flashed a quick but unmistakable glance of recognition at Christine. The prick of curiosity proved stronger than the stab of hunger. Christine came to one of her quick decisions. She would follow the girl. Perhaps that way adventure lay.

The girl had already possessed herself of a tray with a paper napkin encasing knife, fork and spoon. Christine snatched up one. At the counter the girl let her eye wander deliberately down the printed list on the back-wall, then ordered a cup of tea and a chocolate éclair. When the white-aproned maid set the desired articles on her tray, the girl with another quick stare at Christine who stood close beside her, passed to the desk where she nonchalantly flipped down a coin

Christine duplicated the order, and balancing the tray a bit awkwardly, stepped up behind her to the desk. Fifteen cents her check read. She thrust one hand in her bag, confidently at first, then frantically. Her tiny coin-purse was gone.

CHAPTER XV

JENNIE CHUBB AND AN ENVELOPE

Red burned high in Christine's cheeks, and a look of mortification showed in the gold-irised brown eyes.

"I — why — I —" she stammered to the young person with bronze-smooth hair at the cashier's desk. I —"

A coin was pressed into her hand. Startled, she glanced about. Which of the many tray-bearers good-naturedly jostling her and one another was the donor? There was nothing to help her decide. With an explosive sigh of relief she thrust coin and check under the grating, and snatching up the ten-cent piece which appeared with lightning-quick rapidity, fled to the nearest table where she proceeded to remove the contents of her tray.

"I — beg your pardon. I didn't notice this was your —" hastily she began to replace the paper-napkin enfolded knife, fork and spoon on the battered server, but a hand was put out to restrain her, and the black-silk garbed girl with the unmistakable glint of recognition in her glance, invited breezily, "Don't mind me. No reserved seats here, you know. Anyhow, one place's bad's 'nother right now. This little old joint's always packed like a box of socks at feedin' time. Besides," she went on, with a short, unsteady laugh, "I've been tryin' to make you come here — with my lamps, I mean. You see," her voice was perfectly cool and level now, but the eyes that she lifted to Christine's were a blue flame, "I've been layin' for you for a while back and now at last I've got you."

Before Christine in her astonishment could speak, her companion had helped herself to an overlarge bite of chocolate éclair, and was observing a bit indistinctly therefrom, "A course you don't know me any more than a gray squirrel, now do you? No, 'tain't likely you would. But I got you the sec' I lamped you, and now that you're here," she burst out, with a sudden note of passion, "I'm goin' to get my money's worth."

"Your money's worth," Christine repeated, in an accent of profound surprise. Bewilderedly she turned this over and over in her mind, then she reached one of her quick decisions. She leaned forward with her most engaging smile. "Of course, it was you who put that blessed quarter in my hand. I was wondering and wondering who saved my life. I was all ready to sink through the floor when —"

"Cut it," commanded the girl shortly. "They ain't time for that now — I've got to get back on the jump this noon, and I wanna get this off my chest. I — I'd 'a' done that for any sister," she added, a whit more gently, "so don't you get het up about nothin'."

For the moment she seemed all absorbed in scraping every trace of the chocolate éclair from the plate. Halfway on its journey to her lips she flung down the spoon. "Look at me," she commanded, with a fierceness that made Christine set down her cup untasted. "Don't you remember me, honest to God? Look."

Christine looked, searching her memory. It was a pretty face, with a small straight nose, a saucy chin and dimples in the corners of the coralled lips, though the rouge-dashed cheeks were appallingly sunken and the eyes darkly shadowed.

"I'm sorry," Christine shook her head.

"I see where I have to introduce myself. Miss Christine Trevor, meet Miss Jennie Chubb," she said, with ironic politeness. "You don't know me yet? Well, I'm the girl what sold you a filet lace blouse at Madame Roselle's a year ago this May, and you lost your pearl pin, and said I hooked it."

Christine made a slight exclamation, and color scorched her cheeks.

"You got me now, huh?"

"Y-yes, I remember now, but you gave it back and —"

"You mean you got it back and for you that was about all there was to the mess."

Christine positively gaped at her. "Whatever do you mean?"

The other girl gripped the edge of the table as if to catch control of herself, then she brought out with fire, "The only thing you had in your head was your precious pearl pin. It never even came into your noodle I was a human bein', a girl with a heart and a body, and, yes, a soul, just like you. Say, honest now," she fixed Christine with burning eyes, "did you ever give me a thought? Did it ever once come to you to wonder what I got after you had your pin?"

Christine's lips moved mechanically, but no words came.

"I'll let you in on my dark past, then. You was dead sure, you remember, ready to swear to the Madame that I was the only person who'd been in the room while you was havin' that fittin', now wasn't you?"

The memory of the hateful scene in the rose-hung fitting-room with its disarray of gossamery lace blouses, and herself the central figure with the girl, who was now her vis-à-vis, hovering over her to assist, advise, direct, flashed into Christine's stimulated memory. She nodded.

"And then you jumped in with both feet and squealed to Madame that when I went back into the shop for another load of blouses to suit your fancy, I was gone a beast of a time." Without waiting for confirmation, she hurried on, as if urged by a memory still red-hot and excoriating, "After that, the Madame had me searched — didn't she? — and she didn't find it on me, but the store detective wasn't slow in lightin' on it in my locker. It's a cinch you haven't forgotten that, but that's as far as it went for you."

Christine made no sound. All her distress was in her eyes.

"I'm goin' to tell you the rest, now, for two reasons — Katie died over a month ago from the con, and I —" under the edge of the glass-covered table her fingers clutched at a small black-silk bag swung on her left arm. "Well, I shan't tell you the other reason just now. It's good enough to keep," her voice shook with defiance.

"I — I don't just understand —" began Christine, with unusual humility. The hot, crowded surroundings, the clatter of dishes, the babel of shouted orders and snatches of loud conversation, her companion's passionate anger and unconcealed desire for revenge were thoroughly upsetting. " Katie —" she broke off and looked questioningly at the other girl.

" She was that tall, swell-lookin' blonde that worked in the blue room. Remember her? She used to kid herself she looked like you. You didn't see her come in — you were all for choosin' between two stunnin' blouses I was showin' you — but I did, and I saw her cop your pin. Oh, she didn't come in for that — she wanted to see your hair do-up. She was sort of scared when you knocked your gown off the hook, and when she almost stepped on your pin she was in a purple fit. I saw it all in the mirror. You was talkin' and talkin' about the difference in the thread of the lace and I answered you, but I had my eye peeled for her. She looked round, careless-like. We both looked busy. Then I saw her drop her handkerchief and pick it up. She hung around a minute and then slipped out. It was dead easy, now wasn't it?"

" But I don't understand. It was in your locker."

" Oh, yes, that was dead easy, too.

" When I trotted back into the shop for some more blouses to show you, I went plump to Katie and told her what I seen. She didn't even try to deny it. She said she hooked it and then got scared and flung it into my coat-pocket. She said she must have went crazy to touch it, and then she started in to cry and tell me the doctor'd told her the night before she had the con and must get out into the country and she hadn't a cent saved up, and she saw your pin and she thought — oh, you know, it's the same old bunk. You had everythin' and she didn't have but one shirt to her back, and all that."

"But why didn't you tell Madame that when the pin was found in your coat?"

To the end of her life Christine never forgot the look that those blue eyes flashed. It set her face aflame.

"The girl was dyin', didn't you hear?" was the only answer she made. A minute came and went in which she leisurely opened her bag and before its minute mirror powdered her nose and adjusted her hat to a more coquettish angle. "Well, now that you've heard my sob-story, I'd better be movin', or I'll lose my job in the kennel. Not that I'd much mind that — now." Again her fingers sought the little black silk wrist-bag.

"Why didn't you come and tell me the whole story?" Christine demanded, putting out her hand impulsively. The other girl shrugged her shoulders with a gesture of utter hopelessness that hurt Christine.

"The crazy thought did come into my head once when I was down and out, I mean when it seemed as if I just never could get a job again, but then what'd 'a' been the use? You wouldn't 'a' believed me — I couldn't 've told you about Katie then — it's on the level, now she's gone — and you wouldn't 've understood. How could you? I'm a workin' girl and you're a — a rich female loafer."

For a long moment the last words hummed themselves over and over in Christine's mind. A rich female loafer! So that was this girl's estimate of her, vulgarly put as it was. And though she was rich no longer, she was still merely that — an idler, a trifler, a female loafer in the busy world of workers in whose vortex she was for the moment caught up.

"Where are you now? You spoke of losing your job if you're late. You did find something to do?"

The girl's lips parted in a bitter little smile. "If you call it a job. I sell socks in Kennedy's basement. Ever been there? But a'course not. And I didn't light on that neither till I'd tramped my shoes into rags. Queer, wasn't it, how that pearl-pin yarn dogged me about? Gee, but it looked like heaven to me, though, when Mr. Murphy said he'd take me on. Now, I — I —know different. It's worse than a kennel. A dog gets light and air, but that's more than —"

"You shan't stay there another hour!" In her glowing hot indignation Christine half-rose to her feet. "I'll — Oh!" With a smothered little cry she dropped back in her seat. "I keep forgetting things are — different, and — my word wouldn't have any influence now. But I am sorry," she ended, with a note so genuine that a look of pleased surprise swept into Jennie's face.

But the next instant her face settled into its hard lines again, and she broke into a mirthless little laugh. "Say, it'd 'a' done me good even to hear you say that a while back, let alone you're tryin' to help me, but it don't much matter now."

A minute ticked itself away before she spoke again, and then it was with a burning resentment that made Christine unable to raise her eyes from her plate. "Lordy, but didn't I get pretty nearly on speakin' terms with the devil those weeks and weeks and weeks! There ain't much use talkin' about that now, though, and every second I stay here spielin' away helps my chance to get bounced. But I don't care"— openly now she fingered her wrist-bag. "Say, but I got to hatin' and hatin' and hatin' you till it seemed like the whole world was one big mess of hate —"

"But I didn't understand," came Christine's faint protest.

"Of course you didn't. You rich ones never do. How should you? But I'm goin' to be one of you now," she flung up her pretty head in defiance. "Haven't I the right to live same as you? Ain't I sick enough to die of patchin' and darnin' and never havin' enough to eat? It's just like he wrote, it's a burnin' shame a good-lookin' thing like me should slave her life away in a cellar. I tell you, I'm dog-tired of it all."

For a moment after she had finished the silence remained unbroken. Christine sat, eyes downcast, revolving in her mind the curious situation in which she found herself, and the even more curious love-problem into which her intensely vital young companion was involving at least her interest and sympathy. The other girl, too, seemed all absorbed in her own thoughts. Suddenly she sprang to her feet.

"Well, so long." Then with a laugh filled with a reckless gayety she added, "When you see me again, I'll be worth a once-over. I'm goin' to be lit up with oceans of real diamonds and I'll be ridin' in my own bus, and clothes — oh"— she clasped her hands in ecstasy as one who sees a vision of happiness fulfilled — "I'll be wearin' regular clothes."

Christine came to her feet, too. On a sudden, queer, thoroughly inexplicable impulse she decided she must know more of this girl. Something drew her, impelled her to keep close to her. A faint fear even began to possess her that somehow she would lose sight of her. It was as if a sixth sense was prompting her when she essayed, "Let me walk with you? I've nothing better to do for a short time," and she flashed the other girl the smile that always warmed the heart of the recipient.

"You walk with me!" Jennie stammered in incredulity. "You wouldn't if you knew. You wouldn't —"

For answer Christine slipped her arm through Jennie's, and so they made their way side by side through the pressing crowd of workers hurrying back to their posts.

"When do you leave Kennedy's?" Christine broke an awkward little silence.

"Any old time." Jennie's tone was nonchalant, but she held her face averted. "I — I got a letter from him this mornin'. He's your kind," she flung up her head with a quick, defiant pride. "He's —" She broke off, and seemed to be struggling to contain herself, then went on somewhat irrelevantly, "I met him some time back at our Salesgirls' Charity Ball, and he fell for me right on the spot. But then I wasn't feelin' like I do now. Some days I've a hunch I'll be a down-and-out one like Katie, and I can't sleep a-nights, thinkin' and thinkin'. Last night I dropped in to see a doctor — I've been havin' a pain in my chest just like it started with her — and he sure scared me into purple fits tellin' me things to eat and do and live easy and out-of-doors. Lots he knows," with a sniff of scorn, "about Kennedy's basement, and then this here letter comes to-day, and I'm goin' to do it. Well, here we are, and good-bye."

Jennie had already set her foot in the vault-like entrance of Kennedy's Emporium when she suddenly darted back to Christine who was standing uncertainly on the edge of the sidewalk, a bit bewildered by the abruptness of her companion's departure. Jennie's face showed a curious blending of emotion, pride, despair, defiance as she caught at Christine's hand. "I s'pose you'll think I'm fresh, but, but," her words came in breathless haste, "it's been just like a little bit of sunshine and the country to have you walk along like that with me, like we was friends, you know, and after what — say, I don't s'pose you'll ever speak to me again." Her blue eyes were lifted in a child's wistfulness.

"Why not? Perhaps we won't ever meet after you're married, but if we do —"

"Married?" Jennie's tone echoed in Christine's ear for many a day. "Oh, not that."

Christine simply stared.

"I thought you — understood. It's the other," Jennie half whispered. "He ain't goin' to marry me, but he's rich, and'll give me everythin', and I'm down-and-out, I tell you, and a sick un, too," she whimpered.

In Christine's youthful judgment black was black, and white was white. There was no gray. But suddenly something stronger than the moral principles which had been the gift of generations of pure-minded women, with all their inhibitions, and upright, clean-handed men possessed her. She experienced no mental shrinking from Jennie Chubb. Her only thought was that here was a young girl like herself, dancing on the edge of a precipice, and she must stretch out a hand to draw her back. Perhaps the mantle of her gracious mother, who would have known how to meet this difficult problem with a wise and far-seeing spirit of fellowship, descended for this brief second of time on the inexperienced young shoulders of her daughter. At any rate, her response to the moment's need was instant.

With a gentleness that told that the petals of her heart, once so tightly closed, were slowly, slowly opening to the sunlight of human needs and human claims, she put her hand on Jennie's thin little arm, and drew her apart from the curiously staring gaze of the young salesgirls who were trooping through the door.

"I'm only a girl like yourself, Jennie," she said, in a voice so low that the other had to draw nearer to catch the words, "and I don't know how to talk about — things like that. But if you do — it — that — what you said, you'll be a lame dog all your days. I can't explain — oh," her face lighted with a sudden inspiration, "let me come to see you. I want to give you back your money, anyhow, and —"

"I couldn't see you here no ways," began Jennie doubtfully.

"Not here. At your room." With her fine intuition she was quick to divine the trend of the other's thought. "You needn't care about that. It's you I want to see."

There was a tense moment in which Jennie battled with herself, and the battle was imaged in the blue eyes. Then she gave her companion a long, intense, searching look which made Christine's blood quicken and her breath come uncontrollably fast. Inexplicable as it was, she felt she was being weighed in the balance. A wordless prayer formed that she would not be found wanting. As she met the other's gaze squarely, an aching emotion filled her.

"A lame dog," Jennie's lips formed the words. "I — I see what you mean. I'm no better now than a dog in a kennel," she said, lifting her chin with the air of defiance that seemed so much a part of her, "but I've never been a lame dog yet."

With fingers that trembled she spread open her black silk bag and brought forth an envelope. For a breath she regarded it. Christine saw her face turn sickly pale under its layer of powder and rouge, and her eyes suddenly overflow. "It's — it's goin' to be darned hard," she half sobbed. Then with a quick bracing of her shoulders she drew from the envelope several thin sheets of paper covered with a huge sprawling handwriting, and tore them into bits, which she scattered in the gutter.

"Here's my address," she handed the envelope to Christine. "You — you can see for yourself the other reason I told you about your pearl pin."

Christine folded the envelope into a small square, and tucked it into her gold-meshed bag. "I must run now," she said, with a hasty movement of the wrist that held her watch. "Good-bye, Jennie, and don't forget I'm your debtor for life."

CHAPTER XVI

CHRISTINE MAKES A DISCOVERY

The day held one more chance encounter for Christine. She was working her way determinedly through the odd medley of travelers always to be found in a suburban-car waiting-room when a hand was laid on her shoulder and she felt herself pivoted about.

Her frown and half-uttered exclamation of impatience changed into a warm smile of recognition and an outburst of surprised jubilation when she found herself in the grasp of a more than middle-aged man with a shock of hair still black and black eyes in which the fires of youth were yet burning.

"You, Monsieur Armande! Why, I haven't seen you in a hundred thousand years. Where did you come from? Did you dance down some sunbeam? How long will you be here, and where have you put up? Can't I —"

"Softly, softly, Mees Chreestine." Still possessed of her hand, he began to draw her out of earshot of some bystanders who were manifesting a quickening interest in the unusually pretty girl who was so evidently thrilled with an exulting excitement. "Now, we will sit here, so." He escorted her gallantly to a seat well in the rear of the waiting-room, then sat down beside her. "I will answer your questions, as you say, in good order, hein, Mees Chreestine?"

"But why aren't you at school?" Christine demanded, impatient of her companion's grave deliberation. "Surely you haven't given up the dancing-lessons. Oh, that would almost finish Miss Evans! You know you're the drawing card of her whole school."

"No, no, not that, Mees Chreestine; I'm here, you say, to a visit. My daughter, Carlina, comes to-night for a dance, and she wills that I see her and also at the same time, rest for a short time. I have a sort of cousin here, and my doctor says a little rest is for me good."

"Carlina, that wonderful dancer, your daughter? Oh, Monsieur Armande, how perfectly splendid! You always said you were her teacher, but I never dreamed she was your daughter."

The man raised his head with a curiously foreign expression of pride. "You speak right. She is wonderful, and, most wonderful, she is mine and I made her what she is! Ah! What triumphs she has had, and what triumphs she will yet have!" He clasped his hands with an almost feminine outburst of rapture, then added meditatively, "You are the only *Americaine* I ever saw, Mees Chreestine, that I wished to do for. You had a — a chance, you say, to be almost, not quite, a second Carlina. But you are rich, you have no need, no ambition. I could have made you —" he paused on the unfinished sentence with a little gesture of despair.

"We're not rich any more, Monsieur Armande," Christine informed him, with her native honesty. "Father died very suddenly, and everything was in a horrible mix-up." Her straight brows twitched into a frown, and a scarcely audible sigh escaped her; then she added, with an odd, careless laugh, " But didn't the girls tell you — I wrote to Grace Austin and Margaret Cameron and Eva Roberts — I'm to be married soon."

He nodded, studying her face with grave intentness, " To that young Van Ness. He's — what you say — a money-bags, hein, Mees Chreestine? And the world has lost an artiste."

" And I my street-car," thought Christine ruefully, with a glance out of the tail of her eye at her wrist-watch. Aloud she said with a pretty deference, " You surely did make me work in those good old days, Professor, but I never in all my life was so happy. I wish — sometimes, I wish —" Her mobile face was transfigured for an instant by some inner light, then it was gone. She frowned, twisting her handkerchief into a grotesque shape, and lapsed into silence.

Her companion, too, was silent. A melancholy smile played about his lips, and in his eyes was the sadness of one who sees visions of beauty that are to remain forever unrealized. " Too bad, too bad," he brought out abruptly, then with a sudden return to himself and his surroundings, " But I must not keep you, I must not keep myself. I wish to catch the next car to Hilton — my cousin lives there. You will come to see me, Mees Chreestine? I will give you my address."

" Of course, I'll come, Professor," the girl declared with the impetuosity of her temperament, as she drew out her ivory tablets and pencil. " I'll come if I have to move all the stars around in the sky and push the sun and the moon out of the way too."

The other laughed at her fervor. " So like my Carlina! You will come to the dance to-night, hein? She will be *ravissante.* No, ah, I see," he said with a quick glance at her mourning garb. "Poor Mees Chreestine!"

"You will not forget me?" he called out from the back platform of the moving car into which she had assisted him. She had barely time to give a reassuring "No, indeed, Professor," when her own car started forward and she had to swing herself up the high step.

That was a superlatively short trolley ride for Christine. She had so much to live over — the delightful shopping expedition, the encounter with Mrs. Potts, the curious experience in the serve-self, the pleasant meeting with Professor Armande at the suburban station.

When she stepped off the car it was into the embrace of the twins who had been waiting radiant-eyed on the edge of the Trevor grounds.

"You're the bestest sister," Daffy fairly shrieked, hurtling herself against Christine almost before she had set foot on the pavement. "Our new shoeses comed, 'n' 'Melia tried 'em on —"

"'N' our socks, too," piped out Dilly, as usual the shrill supplement of his twin, "'n' Laurie's got a new book, 'n' he can't hear a word you say. He's reading so hard 'n'—"

"You're just n'orful late for the story," cut in Daffy reproachfully, "'n' we waited 'n' waited till we was 'most dead —"

"'N' now you're here," Dilly said, as he clung like a stick-fast to Christine's hand, "'n' we're glad 'n' you'll tell us all about that Moon-baby all over again, won't you, Christine?"

"I really ought — I've been gone since early morning," the girl began uncertainly, but the pleading little voices, and the eager clinging hands outweighed her desire for rest, a bath, and a change of clothes. "I'll tell you just one story this afternoon, then I must positively attend to some other things."

With a twin on either hand, to the accompaniment of squeals of delight she hippety-hopped across the sunny stretch of lawn to their favorite rendezvous for the afternoon.

Laurie was already settled in a comfortable chair, with Christine's gift spread open in his lap. He greeted her with shining eyes, and "You're just bully, Christie. It came about an hour ago, and I'm half through already. I — I don't know just how to thank you."

"Pouf-pouf! Thank me — for what?" Christine camped on the edge of a rug spread over his feet. "You must have been eating it up to be that far already."

"I read pretty fast. I'd have been farther along, but I've —" He broke off with a sudden shamefacedness.

Christine followed his glance. His eyes were drawn as if irresistibly to their neighbor's garden. There in a chaise-longue lay Joshua Barton, encased as usual in a mummy-like wrapping of rugs and shawls despite the pleasant warmth of the May sun. By his side stood his crutches, insignia of his helpless misery. His eyes were closed as in sleep, but on his ashen face was stamped a look of poignant misery and suffering that for the first time touched the girl.

"He looks mighty sick," Laurie half-whispered, as if afraid to rouse the sleeper, "and just awfully sad."

Christine's mood of sympathy for Joshua Barton was fleeting. "Sad! Not he," she tossed the word to scorn. "Plain hateful. Why, he has just everything the way he wants — heaps of money and everybody to dance as he whistles. Of course, he's lame and all that, but he's an out-and-out grump. He probably was born a grump; anyhow, it's a safe bet, he'll die a grump. You've been letting your sympathy run away with you, old dear."

Laurie shook his head, unconvinced. "I know," he said in a quiet voice. "He's lonely, and that's why he's a grump. I know," he repeated, with a quickly withdrawn glance at the crutches beside his chair.

"You're — Daffy, Dilly, whatever are you two squabbling about? Come here, twinnies, and kiss and make up. I thought you wanted to hear all about the Moon-baby who wouldn't —"

"But — but," began Dilly boldly, then his courage appeared to ooze out at a stern glance from his mate, and an even more peremptory kick in the shins.

"Daffy Trevor, that isn't nice and polite," Christine remonstrated. "Ladies don't kick like mules. What is the matter, Chickie?" At the sweetly pleading tone and the arm flung caressingly about her shoulder, the small mutinous face showed signs of yielding.

"I did it, 'n' I ought to tell, oughtn't I, sister? I'll — I'll tell you every bit, honest, cross my heart 'n' spit, only you tell us the story first."

But past experience with this angelic-appearing imp of mischief made Christine quick to sense some danger.

"Not a word of that lovely story about the Moonbaby who wouldn't — until you 'fess up, and this minute, too."

Daffy appeared to hesitate, then the firm look in Christine's eyes which she had come to know and respect, brought her to the point of confession. "Misery wasn't nowhere 'n' 'Melia was asleep," she began, with tantalizing slowness, then eagerly interrupted herself to ask, "Can I tell what I've got to do, like going to bed or not having any supper, you know, like the Blueies?"

"Name your own punishment? Yes, yes, go on, Daffy."

"'N' the doorbell ranged, 'n' he wanted you, 'n' he said he was in a hurry, 'n' he comed right in 'n' he sat down, 'n' I asked him perlitely — like you said — for his coat 'n' hat 'n' —"

"I tooked 'em in the hall," broke in Dilly, who had been quivering with impatience to share in his twin's recital, "'n' then Daffy said we should play grown-ups with his coat 'n' hat 'n' cane, 'n' we tooked 'em out behind the barn 'n' —"

"'N' we found lots 'n' lots of papers in the pockets, not a teeny-weeny bit in order," Daffy airily resumed the narrative, "'n' we fixed 'em all in nice piles 'n' then the wind came 'n' blowed some of 'em away, 'n' we got most of 'em, honest, we did, Christine, 'n' — say, you aren't awful mad —"

But Christine had thrust aside the small penitent and was running toward the house, her feet scarcely touching ground. She continued with unabated speed up the front steps and into the living-room and almost into the arms of a thin, bespectacled little man with twitching eyebrows and hands that were always rubbing each other, who had come forward to meet her.

"I thought it was you, Mr. Graves," she panted. "I just this moment found out you were here. Those wretched little imps of twins never told me till now —" she had to pause for breath.

"I was in a bit of a hurry, Miss Christine, but I've had time to cool my heels. The next car doesn't leave for a half-hour yet," he consulted his watch with his usual deliberation. "That'll give me ample leisure to go over all the details of the business matter that brought me here. I —"

"Please let me tell you first of the prank the twins have been up to," she interrupted, as he made a movement toward the hall. "They played with your overcoat and hat, and — lost some of your papers. Oh, Mr. Graves, I can only hope they weren't of any great, great value, but I'm so afraid they were. Whatever shall we do?"

Mr. Graves looked worried and the look of worry had deepened when, a minute or two later, he re-entered the room, with several bundles of papers in his hands. "I've gone over things very hurriedly, and so far miss only two. One a blank that can be easily replaced, but the other — I'm afraid unless it's returned — it might —" He compressed his thin lips, then apparently banishing whatever misgivings assailed him, managed to smile into the girl's troubled eyes.

"There, there, Miss Christine, it's not so important as all that, and an advertisement in the papers with a little reward'll do wonders."

"Is it — is it, a paper that belonged to you?"

"To be quite frank with you," he answered, in his slow monotone, after a moment of hesitation, "it was a statement of some of your affairs that I should prefer not to have fall in the hands of anybody other than Dr. Denton just at present, and it was at his request that I had made it out."

Color began to flow back into Christine's cheeks. "I'm glad no one else'll have to suffer for those twinnies' mischief. I'll scour every inch of the neighborhood for those papers myself."

"I trust you'll find at least the one. It'll be a relief to me to have it safe in my possession again. And now, Miss Christine, if you'll sit beside me at this table, I'll go over some figures with you as best I can from memory."

With characteristic deliberation and love of detail he entered into a long explanation of various complicated business transactions that the final winding-up of her father's estate had entailed, then as gently as he could, acquainted her with two disquieting facts. The stock that had been yielding them nearly half their income since her father's death had failed to pay its usual quarterly dividend, and experts were of the opinion that the corporation never again would regain itself. Further, the past night, shortly before midnight, the Trevor warehouse on the river's edge had burned to the ground.

"That means there'll be no rent until we rebuild," he said, studying her through narrowed lids to see if she gathered the full import of his statement. "You understand?"

Christine reflected a moment. "Yes," with a certain grave simplicity. "You mean we'll have no money at all to depend on until the warehouse is rebuilt. How soon'll that be?"

"Some months," he answered evasively, and began to fumble with the papers spread out before him. He cleared his throat. "You see, Miss Christine, we'll need money to rebuild. I'm sorry to trouble you with these unpleasant matters — I know how careful your father was to keep his women-folk free of such worries — but what's to be done now? You have to understand." He cleared his throat again. "As I was saying, we need money to rebuild. There'll be some insurance — almost a negligible matter, though — the building was hardly half covered with insurance. Your father planned to tear the warehouse down this fall and put up an immense structure, so, though he considered increasing the policy once or twice, he let the matter rest."

He tapped his pencil nervously on the table, then blurted out, "The only way out I can see at the present is to raise money on this house, though I know it'd be the last thing your father would ever do." He heaved the sigh of relief of a man who has performed a dreaded task.

"What does Docky think?"

"That's just where the shoe pinches. He went east last night for no one knows how long. Didn't give me a hint he was going — must have been something important that came up all of a sudden, and the devil of it all — I'm sorry, Miss Christine, but this is such a — er — unfortunate stroke of ill luck, I'm hardly responsible for what I say — he didn't leave an address. Said he'd wire in a couple of days, and this is a matter that requires immediate action. I've got to get things under way at once or —"

Christine regarded him with sweet seriousness. "Father always trusted you, I know, and we children surely do."

A sudden mist clouded the bespectacled eyes. "Thanks, Miss Christine, you can count on me to do for you as for my own."

She laid her hand on his impulsively. "It's fine to have friends like you and Docky to look after us. I hate to see you look so worried, though, but anyhow, it won't be long now before I'll take care of Laurie and the twins as the family of Mrs. Cort Van Ness," her head went high in unconscious pride, "ought to be cared for."

"Of course I shall undoubtedly not take any decided measures until I get in touch with Dr. Denton, though he usually leaves all matters of a business nature in my hands, but I must get the wheels in motion." He began to gather the scattered papers. "And, Miss Christine," he went on, rubbing his hands together with a dry, crackling sound, a little mannerism that always bespoke interest or excitement, "I think it best for several reasons to keep it quiet that we're going to throw this place on the market. You see, it'd look like a case of dire necessity," he explained as if on second thought, "and that might cut down its value, at least, to some extent."

In the doorway he turned. "If you should obtain any information as to the whereabouts of those papers, you would notify me at once. Thanks, I wouldn't have had it happen — but, of course, Miss Christine, it's absolutely of no consequence."

In the late afternoon Christine abandoned her second unavailing search. The twins were her indefatigable aides — Daffy had chosen that as part of their self-inflicted punishment, the remainder to consist of going to bed an hour earlier than usual for a whole week. Together the three had scanned every inch of the Trevor grounds for the missing papers.

"Could they have blown over the hedge," Christine had anxiously asked. Somehow, the knowledge was borne in upon her that Joshua Barton would be the last person to whom the Trevor family secrets could safely be entrusted.

A feeling of relief swept over her at their unanimous statement that they had chased them a short distance in the opposite direction.

Yet she had scoured under the hedge and on either side and had even bounded once or twice across the hedge into the now empty Barton grounds to clear away her doubts. Not a scrap of paper marred the Barton close-shaven green stretches.

"I'll make Doug help me look," she promised herself, wearily trailing into the living-room. With a little cry of delight she swooped down on the pile of mail on the table. "Letters — one from Cort — thanks be." A smile touched her lips, and winged with the exuberance of youth, she flew up the stairs and into her bedroom as if there was no such word as weariness in her vocabulary. The next instant in the depths of her favorite easy-chair she was tearing through the badly spelled, badly written letter.

The smile had been erased from her lips, and her eyes held a new gravity as she read the sheets slowly for the second time. Then with a curiously disdainful gesture she tossed them on the floor. For a time she sat motionless, her hands clenched as if she were fighting herself, her thoughts. Then she rose, and walked to the open window. In a tree-top close by a bird was pouring out his heart in a burst of rapture to the setting sun. That was all that broke the late afternoon stillness.

Christine moved away from the window, back to her easy-chair. She was trying to collect her thoughts. What was she to do? Cort had written that his father had decided to postpone their return until early fall. Of course, that would be deuced hard on her, and he didn't like it any too well himself, but then his job for the present was to stick to the governor, who wasn't feeling any too fit. There was great business ahead, for the governor and Mr. Archer were considering buying some old silver mines and other junk. He and Ag weren't interested except that they'd probably take a run up the mountains with their governors and that promised some sport in riding up the trails. They'd been to a dance last night. Ag had promised to write her a full account of the fun. Ag was a great old girl but not to be named in the same day with his own Chris. They'd have some wonderful wedding in the early fall, and he had a hunch the governor was planning to give them a silver mine or some such trifle for a wedding present.

At this point in her thoughts Christine's lips twisted into a wry little smile. A silver mine or some such trifle for a wedding present, and the Trevor family was facing absolute want! Oh, she had clearly understood what Mr. Graves was trying in all delicacy to express. Except for this roof that covered them, they stood empty-handed. Something had to be done, and to be done quickly, and who was there but she to do it?

What could she do?

A sudden doubt filled her, and terror, stark terror, clutched at her heart. Then a quick courage followed on the doubt and terror. Her body braced itself and with the swiftness and poignancy of an inspiration she knew what she could do. The idea quickened action. She darted to the dressing-table where she had thrown her gold-meshed purse. In it were her tablets. She would find Prof. Armande's address, and — The purse slipped from her fingers and emptied itself on the rug. With an exclamation of impatience she flung herself on her knees to collect its scattered contents. Pencil, coin-purse, powder-case, visiting cards—what folded paper was this? An envelope, the address of the girl she had met in the restaurant. In the waning light she gave the envelope a hurried glance — Miss Jennie Chubb. How curiously familiar it looked! She glanced at it again, then with quivering speed scrambled to her feet and the window. She stared at the envelope incredulously. Another very careful, very deliberate inspection, then, though she knew the truth, she snapped on the lights, gathered the scattered sheets of her letter from the floor, and sat down at her desk. The envelope was postmarked Rio Janeiro; the handwriting was the same almost undecipherable scrawl of her letter.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BROOCH WITH THE MEDUSA HEAD

For those who have not wayfared far along the path of life, there is no sharper sting than disillusion. And Christine suffered with all the intensity of a high-strung, sensitive nature. A woman of more years, with a wider range of experience, might have palliated the offense. Cort had never known a mother. The idol of a fabulously wealthy father, he had been spoiled from the very cradle. His whole life had been regulated by his desires and with him every impulse for enjoyment was as quickly executed as conceived. His keenest sport was to gratify an apparently ungratifiable whimsy. It was as if an obstacle only whetted his appetite. Ambition, purpose, ideal, Cort had none. His only aim was pleasure, immediate and unlimited. Though it never entered her pretty head, Christine had been the object of his keen, hot pursuit chiefly because there were so many rivals to outdistance.

Jennie Chubb! Christine tossed the very name in her thoughts to scorn. Then some of the girl's words flashed back into her memory, and cut her with a bitter sharpness. "He's your kind." "He fell for me the first instant he lamped me." Now she understood the malice that had glinted in Jennie's eyes and shot from her nimble tongue. The hatred that had burned within her for upwards of a year had culminated in this opportunity for revenge. She did not blame Jennie, poor, pretty Jennie, with her sharp terror of following Katie's suddenly ended career. Her anger and grief and disillusionment were all for Cort.

For a space of time she sat with her head bowed and her fingernails dug into the palms of her hands. It was as if for the first time she were facing life with set purpose, and she was finding that life was no glad enterprise. Then she lifted her head, and her eyes with their flecks of gold, revealed a high steady light. Slowly, solemnly, as if conscious of all its hidden and future significance, she drew the great blazing jewel from her left hand, and placed it in a mother-of-pearl jewel-case on her dressing-table. With steady steps she crossed to the window, and settled herself among the cushions piled invitingly on the window-seat. For a time she stayed there motionless, her face lifted to the quiet night sky that was already beginning to gleam like new silver with stars. She was striving to quiet the stir of her tumultuous feelings, to cool her hot cheeks in the wash of soft air.

From her retreat she saw Doug's boyish form leap the hedge, and look uncertainly about for herself. To-night she would fail him in their twilight walk. She must have this time for herself. She had knotted threads to disentangle. She caught Wrinkle's eager bark of welcome followed close by his familiar little whimper of distress, his lament that she neglected to keep her tryst.

Only Amelia's peremptory tap at the door and her "We're waitin' dinner on you, this minute; didn't you hear the bell?" roused Christine from her absorption.

"I've no appetite to-night, 'Melia," she answered listlessly from the window-seat, and fell a prey again to her warring thoughts before the old woman's steps had died away in the hall.

All color had faded from the evening sky, and still she sat, wrapped in the sorrow of disillusion. Recollections were crowding in upon her, sharp as a knife, and she stood face to face with all that she had put from her, all that she could dimly sense the future held for her — gossip, misunderstanding, the triumph of Agnes Archer.

She would stand utterly alone in this voluntary shipwreck of her life. There would be no friend to understand the clarity of her motive. Suddenly, clear as a cut crystal, she conjured up a face out of the darkness, and the smile that shone in the depths of the fine gray eyes made her pulse quicken and lifted up her being into high courage. Docky would understand. He always understood.

A prey to quick impulse, she ran to her desk.

"Cort," her hands were steady now, and a curious illumination was apparent in her face. It was as if she suddenly saw the path lying straight and clear ahead. "Yesterday quite by accident I happened on Jennie Chubb, and quite by accident, too, I learned things. You will see that after that things are not possible between us. I shall give you back your ring when you come home, or send it as you prefer. Please don't write or try to explain. It's all over.

"CHRISTINE."

She stood up. Her heart was strangely full, her eyes dangerously close to tears, but curiously enough they were not tears of sorrow. A strange sense of freedom was flooding her being, and a new radiance of vitality thrilling through every fibre. It was as though the fingers of the future were beckoning her, and she knew with all the joy of the fearless adventurer she was free to follow.

She slept that night the deep, dreamless, unthinking sleep of a child. But even before her eyelids lifted the next morning, a sense of profound sadness filled her, and her wretchedness of the night before became a tangible thing. Resolutely she put it from her and wrapped herself in her garment of pride. For her, love had come and gone — forever. Life only remained. All the gladness, all the savor was gone, to be sure, but there were still the golden heights of fame to be climbed. A sudden enthusiasm filled her, and the sense of freedom that had raised her to enthusiasm the night before again shot through her, and lifted her soul.

The fire of her new enthusiasm was still on her face and in her eyes when she flitted into the living-room. She was tailored in gray, the gray of the winter-sky and her hat of gray had a touch of violet under its wide drooping brim.

"Laurie," lightly she placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. Startled, he glanced up. He had been too absorbed in his task of writing a letter — for him always a real task — to hear her light foot-fall. "I'll be late again for our lesson. I'm sorry, but it's important business."

A fleeting shadow of disappointment was discernible in his voice. "It's a corker of an interesting lesson, and I've worked at it like a good fellow. Why, how — how different you look!"

Color flamed in Christine's cheeks, but she laughed in quick amusement at the boy's wondering tone. "Something wrong with my outfit? I rather fancied it myself."

Laurie's thoughtfulness deepened, and he studied her with puzzled eyes. "It isn't that. You always make a fellow forget what you have on. He only thinks of you. It's — it's your eyes and your whole face that look changed. It's," with the swiftness and sureness of an inspiration, "it's something to do with your soul. That's changed, and it shows."

"You're a wizard, Laurie," Christine tried to hide the stir of her emotions under her full-throated laugh, and again with a happy consciousness of their good fellowship, patted her brother's shoulder. His voice arrested her in the doorway. "How do you spell isolation, Chris? Two ll's?"

"One'll be enough. What are you doing with that big word?" Curiosity edged her tone, and grew as Laurie, with face reddening, attempted to conceal the sheet of paper he had been poring over at her entrance. "A secret? Oh, well, I won't pry. We all have our secrets." And with another light laugh she was gone.

Her hand was on the front-door knob when the unmistakable sound of a sob halted her. Again it came, suppressed, but heart-rending. She looked up the well of the stairs. Misery was busily wiping the white enamel frame of the upper landing, and punctuating each thrust of her arm with a little hushed wail.

"Whatever is the matter, Misery?" Christine's voice was tense with anxiety. Amelia was far from well these days, and Misery was their only real staff in the care of the house. If she should break down — !

" I didn't know any one was here. Please forgive me, Miss Christine, but it makes things easier sometimes to cry 'em out, and I — it's one of my bad days, when I can't get my man and babe what's gone out of my head. And then, this mornin' early, when I was cleanin' my room, I knocked it down and it broke in pieces, and he gave it to me on my last birthday, and I'll never get over it, no, never, never. It tain't like it was an ordinary box, Miss; it's a real jewelry box, and it's filled with good luck. My man told me so, and as long as I'd keep it, I'd have good luck, though Heaven knows it wasn't no good luck to lose him, but I was holdin' it tight in my hands the day Dr. Denton come, and got me for to come here, and that was sure good luck and —"

Christine waited with all the patience she could command for the nimble tongue to stop. " Suppose you get the pieces. There's a French curio shop on Lombard Street and the little old shopkeeper's a perfect wonder. He once mended a mosaic picture frame for me."

Misery clasped her hands with an ecstatic gesture. " If it wouldn't be askin' too much. I'd just die for you, Miss Christine," she assured her, with eyes that still streamed as she gave over into her keeping the neat package containing the precious fragments.

" Better live for me, Misery. You're worth heaps more to me alive than dead. Perhaps your box'll scatter some of its good luck on me."

Christine stood for a moment after she had caught the suburban car, trying to steady herself to the motion, then moved forward to an empty seat well toward the front. Above the babble of sound she heard a familiar voice speak her name and she saw Freddy Blue two seats ahead, smiling and waving at her.

At the next station her seatmate departed and Freddy Blue, fresh as the May morning in a well-worn blue serge suit and nondescript black hat, stowed her tall self in the seat beside her.

"A pleasure all the sweeter for being unexpected," Freddy smiled companionably down at her. "Whither awa', fair lady?" But without waiting for an answer, she proceeded in a rush of words, "I'm going to get out at Thorne Road, so we'll have to talk fast. Poor little Mrs. Lee has twins, and no more idea of caring for them than a — a butterfly. I promised Dr. Denton —"

An inexplicable impulse prompted Christine to interrupt a bit importantly, "Docky isn't in town. He's gone east for two or three weeks."

A little gleam of humor shot into the gray-green eyes, but she answered gravely enough, "I'm wondering how I'll live through that century. We'll know for a certainty then —" She checked herself abruptly with a little gesture of impatience as if at the looseness of her tongue. "I promised Doctor Denton I'd come out here every day," she said irrelevantly the next moment, "but I just couldn't manage yesterday, and, as it is, I'm up to my forehead in things."

Of course, Freddy knew Docky had gone. Christine suddenly became cognizant that a demon of jealousy was stirring in her. She felt it burning in her heart, she felt it clutching at her throat. Freddy had Docky's perfect love. Love for her was done. The blood surged to her face and receded, leaving her shaking from the depth of her feelings.

But she managed to say with a pretty show of friendliness, "Bring your thousand-and-one things over to a cup of tea this afternoon."

Freddy shook her head regretfully. "I've got to scour the attic for something for Tommy to wear at Jennie Eaton's birthday party. Tommy's always gone since she's been out of the shell, and go she shall this year if I have to cut up the lace curtains." Her voice shook with unusual fierce determination.

A swift desire pulsed in Christine in some way to serve Docky. "Things equal to the same thing," she reasoned whimsically with a sudden recollection of a familiar geometrical axiom. It would make him happy if Freddy were happy.

"I'm coming over this afternoon to your house, Freddy Blue," Christine announced with a touch of her old imperiousness, "and we're going to make Miss Tommy a most *recherché* gown from a white net frock of mine. Now, don't argue, because it won't help you a mite. I'm coming and I shall camp on your step till you open the door for me and my thimble and the frock."

She was quick to take advantage of Freddy's evident swaying between two moods. "It won't be more than a couple of hours' work at the most. The sash is all there, and I've ribbons for her hair. What time shall we make it? Three? Speed or you'll be carried to the next road."

It was midway between nine and ten when Christine stepped out of the dimness of the small French curio shop into the brilliant sunshine. Contentment filled her. Misery's good luck box would be so cunningly restored, the little old genius of the workroom had assured her, that no one could detect the juncture of the broken parts.

For a breath she stood irresolute. She really should ride. It would be all of a twenty minutes' walk and she ought to arrive fresh for the lesson. But the sunlight was so enchanting and she would love a brisk walk along the city streets now that she was a country mouse or to speak more truthfully, a suburban mouse. Then, too, she ought to economize her time for Laurie's sake. He was so keen for that history lesson.

A car was rumbling down the street. With a little sigh she yielded up her desire and at that Fate, or perhaps it was the genius of good luck that Misery was confident dwelt in her treasure box, jogged her elbow. Be that as it may, she had one foot off the curb when a tricksy breeze stirred the fragment of a newspaper in the gutter and the sun sought out and lingered on a copper-bronze object. Quickly Christine snatched it up and ran for the car. When she was in her seat, she examined her find with languid curiosity. It had been a brooch, but the pin had been wrenched off. The workmanship was curious, evidently foreign, and there was that in the strange twist of the bronze snakes which encircled the Medusa-head of old agate that made Christine decide it was undoubtedly an antique. With a shrug of indifference she let it slip into her purse and from her memory. In roseate day-dreams she began to climb the rungs of fame's ladder.

She lived through an agony of apprehension while she was waiting for an answer to her touch of the door-bell that marked her journey's end. What if her dreams had been mere dreams? Professor Armande might not be willing to help her climb the golden heights. He — But the next instant the door was thrown open by Professor Armande himself, and the impetuosity and warm eagerness with which he drew her with him into the large old-fashioned drawing-room banished all her misgivings.

With a grave simplicity she told him of her new-found freedom. "But I don't know how I can ever pay you if you do take me under your wing," she wound up with her native candor.

"Pay, *ma chérie!*" His hands flew out in an ecstatic gesture and his words tumbled forth pell-mell. "We do not talk of pay now. You shall be great. You shall dance and draw the hearts out of men. There will be toil and toil, much toil for you and me. I shall not regret it, you shall not regret it. You have temperament — beauty — form — youth; ah, *ma chérie,* you have everything. My Carlina shall —" He broke off his cataract of words, and darted toward an inner room, checked himself abruptly, swung about, and seated himself on a sudden impulse at the open grand piano in the far angle of the huge room. Over his shoulder he shouted, even while his hands masterfully struck some chords, "I am sad, Mees Chreestine; very sad. This will be a sorrowful lesson. My Carlina did not dance at your Ashby dinner — no — she has suffered — what you say — a great loss. She could not dance with a heavy heart. To-day she has still such a sadness — we will begin, Mees Chreestine."

The girl's heart leaped tumultuously to the fire of the music, her pulses quickened, and she slid into the rhythm with all the freedom and supple grace of early youth.

"Good," he murmured once or twice. "I have made no mistake." His words were for himself as he nodded his great thatch of black hair in approval.

"Now we try something light, like a dream." The music melted into a delicate piece of improvisation, and the girl's feet obeyed the spirit of the harmony that was flowing from his finger-tips.

"Bravo," a low voice that held in it a silvery thrill applauded even before the music and the twinkling feet were stilled. "It was the gray tissue of dreams, Mademoiselle, soft and fine and — and intangible as a cobweb." There was in the voice the same fascinating foreign intonation that clung to Monsieur Armande's speech, and even before Christine whirled about she knew it was the world-famed Carlina who complimented her. The blood rushed singing to Christine's ears, and for a moment the world seemed to reel. Then it steadied itself and she met the regard of a woman in the middle twenties, slim as a Dryad. Her face was small, and dead white, with lips that seemed but a scarlet line. Her hair which was heavy and had the lustre of satin, her eyes, her brows, her lashes were of one color, black as a blackbird's breast. For a full moment, rapt in thought, lips apart, the dancer studied the young face with the well-poised head and eager, questioning gaze. Then with one of her fascinating, swaying movements, she caught both

Christine's hands in hers in a vibrant clasp. "*Ma chérie,*" her voice shook with an emotion that was not far from tears, "you have the gift, the great gift, but life will wring your heart's blood before it will be the perfect gift."

With an abruptness that was startling she flung Christine's hand from her, and walked, no, floated, toward her father. "Ah, no, no," she cried, passionately in answer to his question which was inaudible to Christine's ear, "I shall never, never dance again. It is impossible. He gave it — to me it is his heart. I can not," and she burst into wild weeping.

"My Carlina," the old man caressed her hair as if she had been the veriest child. "My Carlina, it will come back. It must come back," then he turned in quick explanation to Christine who had withdrawn herself into the recess of the bow-window. "My Carlina has suffered a great loss — she cannot dance till it is recovered — yesterday she drove out in the late afternoon for air — she stopped at one, two, three shops — somewhere, no one can tell where —she lost a brooch — a gift — a talisman — a head of snakes —"

Subsequently Christine could recall but little of what immediately followed, but she had a jumbled memory of tearing open her purse and thrusting the object she had caught up from the gutter less than two hours before into Carlina's hand. The room was immediately a babel of glad exclamations and broken sentences.

"*Le bon Dieu!*"

"I had no idea it was valuable."

"My Carlina. Mees Chreestine, *ma chérie.*"

"*Le bon Dieu! Le bon Dieu.*"

But for many a year Christine carried the memory of the perfect moment, when Carlina looked deep into her eyes and said with quiet fervor, " May le bon Dieu reward you. The time will come, Mademoiselle, I feel it in my heart, when I, too, can be of some service to you."

CHAPTER XVIII

DOUGLAS TALKS

Christine's mood was a curious blend of emotions as, suit-case in hand that afternoon, she proceeded up the steps of the Blue cottage in fulfillment of her promise to Freddy. Joy still thrilled her at the memory of Carlina's words of approval, but through the gold meshes of her happiness ran a tarnished thread — Cort's faithlessness. And again a feeling which she had but that morning learned to know by its true name, jealousy, shot through her as she conjured up the quiet contentment that shone now in Freddy's eyes. Freddy could well be content. She had given her heart into safekeeping. Docky would be true to the last gasp. He would never —

Her musings were interrupted by the bursting open of the door, and Freddy's cry of jubilation as she flung herself upon Christine with unusual impetuousness. "You dear! I haven't dared believe you meant it. It seemed too good to believe." She laughed, but in the liquid uncertainty of her deep, melodious voice there lurked the suspicion of tears quivering through her mirth.

She unpinned her guest's hat, and settled her in the lovely old grandmotherly chair which had welcomed Christine on her first unwilling visit to the Blue cottage, before she added exultantly but half under her breath, "It won't be long now before I can give

Tommy and Charlie and all of them everything they want."

"It won't be long now." The words sent a stab of pain into her hearer's heart, and to hide the sudden quivering of her lips Christine fumbled for all of a minute at the lock of her traveling-bag. "Here are two gowns that are positively excess baggage," she said, achieving a matter-of-fact tone. "The white net'll make Tommy a rather decent party frock — there's enough ribbon for her baby waist and hair — and this blue organdy ought to make her some sort of a Sunday outfit."

The tall girl looked at her out of wet eyes. "I can't begin to tell you —"

"Don't," interrupted Christine, with a touch of her old imperiousness; "we haven't time and, besides, the kindness is all on your side. I was casting about for some excuse to throw myself in your way this afternoon when I met you on the car."

Christine had an almost fairy touch of the fingers. She could work magic with a bit of lace, a flower and a ribbon, so now her deft hands were busily planning a garment for Tommy's slim body out of the snowy heap of lace and net that had once been a favorite dinner gown, before she eased her mind by saying, "I'm going in seriously now for dancing."

"Seriously! What do you mean?" Freddy gazed at her curiously over the billowy mass that lay on the table. She had chosen the tedious task of ripping. She was more at home with darning and mending and such Cinderella work, she declared, than the art of creating "dreams of hats and frocks."

Christine did not meet her gaze. "It'll probably not be seriously at first. More of a joke, you know, but it's sort of up to me to earn a living for Laurie and the twins, and all I can do is dance."

"But what'll Cort say? He won't let you."

"Cort has nothing to say — now."

Freddy asked no question. It was her eyes that demanded the truth. Christine answered quietly enough, but excitement flamed in her cheeks. "I decided — last night — for good and all. It can't ever be after —" She paused on her unfinished sentence.

The silence that followed vibrated with meaning. Then Freddy did what was a rare thing for her, and Christine, with her quick intuitions, understood. She came to the grandmotherly chair, and gathered its occupant, net, ribbons, lace and all, into her arms and kissed her. Then very quietly she went on ripping. The only reference she made to Christine's confession came abruptly at the close of the afternoon's successful labor over the cup of tea she had insisted on brewing. "You've told Dr. Denton?" Freddy spoke slowly and with grave deliberation.

Christine met the fire of her scrutiny steadily, then shook her head. "I only decided last night. Besides, how could I? He's not in town."

"He won't let you dance. He doesn't approve of dancers. I remember how he almost quarreled with that little Rose Emmons' father for letting her go to New York to study stage-dancing with Bordoni. He has old-fashioned ideas about the things a woman can do, and you, above any one else —" She broke off with the odd, expressive gesture so peculiarly hers.

Christine's body braced itself as if for an attack.

"I've decided," she said, with a pretty, defiant lift of the head. "By the time Docky gets back, I'm expecting to be at least a second Pavlowa." Her mouth twisted into a little smile and then, because they were both so near the beginning of life, they laughed in full, light-hearted merriment.

"Here's to your success, my dear," Freddy rose, her cup of tea held high. Her lips were curved with mockery but a serious light shone in her eyes. "If it's your wish to have your name written in letters of fire on the sky of Broadway, I wish it for you, too."

"I do wish it." Christine's hands went out in a sudden, hungry gesture. "I want life and big things. I want adventure, and laughter, oh, plenty of laughter, and sorrow, too, I suppose, is bound to come. Oh, I want fame, and wealth and everything, everything life can give."

"And all I want is a home and — little ones." Freddy's arms involuntarily moved as if to encircle a small head.

It was a pretty setting: the snowy tea-table, fragrant with white lilacs, the open window with its glimpse of an old-fashioned garden drowsing in the late afternoon sun, and the two girls on the edge of life toasting each other's success in paths so widely divergent.

Tommy's head abruptly inserted in the living-room window and her high trebled inquiry, "Is my party-dress all done, Freddy?" broke the spell of gazing into the future.

A sudden thought came to Christine, quick and sharp, as she pulled on her hat, which goaded her into saying over her shoulder, "Don't say anything to

Docky about my — about me. Promise, Freddy."

"You shall tell your Docky yourself. We'll have other things to talk about when he's home."

The rapt expression in the odd, gray-green eyes tormented Christine throughout her homeward walk.

On some unaccountable impulse she slowed her steps before the Barton grounds with its lavish display of smooth shaven lawn, flowering shrubs and first show of flowers. As always, the mummified figure of Joshua Barton lay in the garden chair in the full glare of the afternoon sun. This time he was not alone. A slim, undersized, boyish figure stood but a few feet away, and even as Christine began to quicken her pace again she heard the familiar stammer, "I — I d-don't think I c-can do it, s-sir."

The next moment an involuntary little cry broke from her and she ran a step or two toward the boy. Joshua Barton had struck him with his crutch.

"Will you c-come for a d-drive tonight?" Douglas asked her without preamble, at their twilight tryst. "I n-need you," he added simply.

His face looked white and drawn, and his eyes had the hurt look of a child's.

The girl disregarded the weariness of body and spirit that were weighing her down. "How's eight o'clock? I must tell Daffy and Dilly their bedtime story first."

"Make it seven-thirty. Heaven knows, it'll be an eternity till then."

"Seven-thirty it'll be to the second, but I'm at the wheel." A flash of mischief stole through the glance she gave him.

But he was all gravity as he answered, "That g-goes without saying."

They had sped for several miles along the river's edge under stars that gleamed silver-bright and a moon that was riding small and low in the heavens, before either spoke. Then Christine turned to him, a question on her lips. "When are you going to tell me, Doug?"

"You must think me a selfish b-brute to — to —"

"Tut five or six times. Out with it, man. And let me warn you, it's not going to be one-sided, either. I may be induced to tell you the sweet, sad story of my life."

"You first."

"Nothing of the kind. This is too heavenly to spoil with my own troubles, besides, at this precise moment, I haven't any. Who could have, with a wheel to guide on a road like this and on a night like this?"

"And in such c-company as I'm in, who c-could help being h-happy?" But the next moment he had heaved a sigh so deep and long that it was almost a sob.

"I'll drive up just beyond the bridge, Doug. There's a splendid bend in the road where we can park the car, and talk to our hearts' content."

It was a fair setting for romance, the moon-white night, the river flowing by so darkly mysterious, and bearing impartially on its smooth surface pleasure craft and tall, freighted vessels, the trees in their trappings of green which so softly arched over the automobile with its occupants in the early exuberance of youth. But it was no romance that Christine coaxed from her companion's lips. The confession began with a question, "Has a man the right to tell a girl he loves her and wants her for his wife if his father died in — prison?"

Christine hesitated, and she knew he held his breath for her answer, though swiftly she realized, too, in that consciousness of the fellowship which bound them together, that she was not the object of his devotion.

"That's a pretty big question for me to riddle out, Doug. It somehow seems all to depend on the girl. I mean how much she loves the man and all that."

"Supposing it was y-you." A wave of blood rushed to his face, as the full import of his words swept over him. "Oh, C-Chris, f-forgive me, I didn't mean — I didn't think — I — I —" He broke off in an agony of embarrassment and pain.

She leaned a breath closer to him, her eyes full of thought, and met his regard steadily. "I understand, Doug. That's what I'm trying to do, I'm trying to put myself in that girl's place. I believe —" She didn't say what she believed. For though she tried and tried hard to put herself in the place of the other girl, she found she was thinking only of herself and Cort and his faithlessness. Her love had not been big enough to withstand that. Then for the first time she faced the question that had been burning in the back of her mind — did she, had she, ever truly loved Cort? And before the answer came or perhaps as answer the face of Dr. Denton, with the grave, deep-set eyes and the steady lips that with their smile could send unexpected pulses of happiness throughout her whole being, painted itself on her memory. In the stillness of the night she learned her own heart's secret.

For a time — so long that Douglas lived through an agony of doubts — she neither moved nor spoke. Then with the sensation of being very small, very insignificant, she said, in a low, unsteady way, " Love makes anything, everything possible."

And her eyes were wet with the sadness that lurks in loneliness. For she would always be lonely now.

"Thank God!" He spoke the words almost inaudibly. "You've given me c-courage," he said, after a moment, " and, Lord knows I need c-courage worst of anything. I really don't k-know where to begin," he went on, helplessly, " I —"

" Begin at the beginning."

"I think I t-told you before that Uncle Joshua p-picked me up as a stray at an orphan asylum after father died. I don't know much about that b-beastly trouble except that Uncle Joshua always h-hated him, so Mark once t-told me. Oh, Uncle Joshua's a great old hater, and when father g-got into some s-sort of a mess, and forged the old d-duck's name, Uncle Joshua had his own b-brother put over the road. Poor old father couldn't stand the s-shame and all, so he up and d-died. And in all these years Uncle Joshua's never for a minute let me forget I'm the s-son of a prison-bird, and he's in the habit of predicting I'll end up that way, myself."

The bitterness of his tone brought her out of the tumult of her own emotions. " You poor boy! How have you stood it all these years?"

" My mother was Irish, and s-something of a p-poet I've been told. I m-must be a b-bit like her, for I've always d-dreamed and s-scribbled down my d-dreams. They've helped me many and many a time when I had all I c-could do not to throw myself under a t-train or drop off the b-bridge. Then love came," he said, simply, "and I had that to l-live for. And now you. You've been wonderful, Christine, just wonderful."

"Seven or eight tuts this time. I haven't done a thing so far, but I'd like to see you get even with that old jelly-fish, some time." She spoke impulsively, the memory of that painful scene in the garden still hot in her mind.

"You can't hurt Uncle Joshua. There's nothing to hurt. He hasn't a heart. Besides, I'm through t-trying. I used to l-lie awake nights when I was a little g-gaffer trying to g-get even, but I've learned that hate is a d-destructive force. It's only love that makes for g-growth toward perfection."

"It's love that makes for growth toward perfection," softly the girl repeated. "I'm beginning to understand."

"Being in love's great, Christine. It teaches you new beauties in life every day. But listen to me. Of course, you know."

Douglas did not see the new light that was born in the depths of the gold-brown eyes, but he was struck by the humility of her reply, "No, I didn't know before. I'm just beginning to learn."

He eyed her incredulously. "You're joking. Cort —"

"Cort is past history with me, Doug," she put in, with a certain grave simplicity. "Please, please don't let's talk about me. That's all there is to my story. You haven't finished yours."

A curious illumination was apparent in his face as he leaned toward her eagerly. "My story isn't finished, thanks to you. I'm g-going to take heart now, and c-carry it through, even though Uncle Joshua —"

He was silent so long that she was fired with impatience to ask, "Were you arguing the question politely with Uncle Joshua this afternoon when — ?"

It was her turn to break off, and a flush scorched her cheeks at her own tactlessness.

"You saw?" He hesitated, and for a moment seemed to sway between two impulses, then braced himself as it with new determination, and looked straight at her. "It is best for you to know. There m-must be no m-misunderstandings between us. Uncle Joshua was merely c-continuing a d-discussion or rather a c-command he started at the breakfast table. He told me to choose between him and you."

"Douglas!"

He raised a lock of hair. In the moon-blanched night a black mark across his temple was clearly discernible.

"A slight t-token of his p-pleasure at my choice."

"Tell me," her eyes were dangerously near to tears.

"There's not much to tell. I believe I was whistling 'Oh, that we two were Maying,' when I came in to b-breakfast. At least, so Mark told me when I asked him the r-reason of Uncle's little tantrum. It's not l-like me to whistle. Suddenly Uncle informed me in a thundering r-rage I was to c-cut the acquaintance of the Trevors or depart. I argued the matter a bit, then m-managed to escape with my head whole to the office. He started in again on the l-lawn this afternoon. That's all."

"Oh, you mustn't break with your uncle on our account. It isn't —"

His voice was tense and eager as he interrupted, "It's b-bound to come sooner or later, so why not sooner? I'm sure s-some day to take the b-bit in my teeth and run."

"But you mustn't let us be the cause. I can't bear to have you —"

Again he broke in, "I shouldn't have t-told you. I'd made up my mind not to, but if I do b-break and run, it'll be b-because it's either that or be b-broken, and I tell you, I won't let him b-break me as he c-crushed father."

One glance she permitted herself at his face, pale and wrenched with pain. Then with the desire strong within her to turn his bitter thoughts into happier channels, she said, with apparent irrelevance, "Life's one grand tangle, isn't it, Doug? I'm wondering if it's because you and I are hitching our wagons to a star?" Then, after a moment in which the memory of the scene at Freddy's tea-table was full upon her, she added, "Freddy Blue, though, seems to have unwound the snarl. I never saw any one so really happy."

"Freddy!" A smile broke forth irresistibly. "I haven't s-seen her for an eternity."

"It does you good just to look at her. She's bright and happy as the — the sun. But it's no wonder."

He waited for her to explain, and after a moment she said with unconscious sadness, "She has her heart's choice."

He faced her with a burning question in his eyes. His lips were speechless. She was lost in thought a moment, then went on half to herself, "She hasn't told me yet, but I know — it's — it's Dr. Denton."

A minute passed, another, then he laughed, a sudden, mirthless laugh. "You're j-jolly well right, Christine. Life is one g-grand old tangle."

The drive home was swift, silent, but as he handed her out of the roadster, a glint of humor crossed his face. "To-night l-lies between me and the g-great old world. Good night, dear little s-sister."

The next morning a note lay beside her breakfast plate. Mark had brought it, Amelia said, almost before she was downstairs.

"It's the world for me, Christine dear," she read, "and long hours for my dreams and scribbling."

Her tears blurred the simple signature, "Doug."

CHAPTER XIX

JENNIE CHUBB AGAIN

That week slipped by for Christine like a dream. Outwardly she was the same, merry of heart, performing her small, self-imposed tasks with cheerfulness, and now and then even lightening the burdens of Amelia and Misery with a thoughtfulness that was a constant surprise and joy to the old serving-woman, at least.

But all through the dancing lessons which engaged her morning hours ran a queer, breathless, high excitement that was yet a strange calm. Her heart's secret thrilled her with joy and at the same time brought her in a breath to the verge of tears. "You are all snow and fire, Mees Chreestine," the old professor said, unconsciously taking on an attitude of passionate admiration at the end of a brilliantly improvised dance which yet abounded in simplicity and youthful grace. "You are, as you say, very improving, *ma chérie*." He rubbed his hands in glee.

And in the late afternoon hours, too, which she spent with the young Trevors, the joy that was "three-quarters pain" overflowed in merry quips, happy chatter, laughter that was gay as the song of a bird. Love consumed her; humility filled her.

She outdid herself in the stories she invented for the entertainment and instruction of the twins. And at the close of one afternoon when Laurie as usual brought out his violin and she sang to the little group, the boy with his sensitiveness of perception was struck by the new depth of her voice. She sang as birds sing, lightly, sweetly, but now there was a quality of emotion exquisite to the ear.

Once in the twilight hour the boy's eyes followed her with a wistful look when she slipped into a stately, measured dance in keeping with the strains he was drawing from his violin. And when she floated into a step, light, gay, irresponsible as a bit of thistle-down, his gaze was still upon her.

Again the violin trembled under his fingers, vibrant and penetrating, and in the swaying, rhythmic grace of Christine's movements, he suddenly divined that a mystery had come about in his sister's heart like the opening of a bud into a full-blown flower.

"What is it?" he asked her, hardly above his breath, when she stood, warmly flushed, her eyes illumined and sweet.

Her gaze never swerved from the loveliness of the garden, from the roses just swelling into being, the clustering mignonette and the brown velvet butterflies sailing by. "It's just life and —" She stopped, falling into dream.

And in a dream she fluttered at twilight up and down the garden paths. She missed Douglas. For a while she let her thoughts wander to the lonely boy, and she wondered where his first adventure into the great world had carried him.

But soon her mind swung back again to herself and that miracle of miracles which love will ever be. And she tasted deep of love's bliss — the giving of one's heart without question, without fear. But she tasted deep, too, of love's sorrow. For her there could be no return of love. He belonged already to another.

Suddenly she threw back her shoulders, and her head was high-poised. "I know now," she said half aloud. "Love is giving, giving your very best. And oh, it's all yours, my dear, my dear."

Then, after a moment, in which her whole being was lifted to the solemnity of the moment, a strange radiance shone in her eyes, and with her face to the stars that were beginning to grow silvery in the night sky, like a young priestess before an altar she spoke as if to a living presence, "I'd be willing to die for you, dear, if that would help you. But I'll do what's ten thousand times harder. I'll live for you, and for your happiness."

A step behind her made her wheel about. Hot color scorched her cheeks. Could Docky —

"Amelia told me I should find you here," Mr. Graves' familiar monotone quieted the tumultuous beating of her heart. "A curious thing has happened, more curious, I should say," he went on, rubbing his hands together with that odd crackling sound which with him was always a manifestation of excitement, "than the mysterious manner in which that missing paper was returned to me last Wednesday through the mails — you have not forgotten my advising you of that fact. It's almost like a direct answer to prayer, and yet —"

He paused so long on his unfinished sentence that Christine was fired with impatience. She coughed three times without the desired effect, then,

"Ah, yes, Miss Christine, forgive me. I'm growing more absent-minded every day. As I was saying, I was visited this afternoon by a gentleman from Newton — that's some small place up state, I believe — and upon my word, he wants to buy this place, and at a figure that's not half bad."

"Buy Rain-on-the-Roof." A strange pain gripped the girl's heart. Her eyes moved swiftly from the low, rambling structure that was her home, with its outlines enchantingly softened and blurred in the early night-light, to the old-fashioned garden and the elm-tree under which she practised her daily dance in thrall to Laurie's music. How dear it all was! She had not realized before —

The slow monotone roused her from her absorption. "It's a difficult thing for me to do, Miss Christine, for don't I know better than any man alive what this place meant to your father? He never — But this is no time for retrospection nor regrets. It's a Godsend, I say, a Godsend, and we must act quickly."

As always in her moment of stress, Christine's thoughts moved to Dr. Denton. "Will he — Docky — approve?"

"There won't be time to consult him, but as I told you at our last interview, he always gives me a free hand in business matters. 'Use your own judgment, Graves,' is what he says. 'John Trevor had full confidence in you and so have I.' Besides, you see, Miss Christine, not to bore you with business details, the whole transaction depends upon promptness. Once let the real estate men get hold of this Mr. —— his name appears to have escaped me — and he never would consider this old place nor this locality. It'll be a weight off my mind to see this deal through. Of course, there's the matter of settling you young Trevors at once in other quarters, and —"

"At once!" Christine could not keep the note of dismay from her voice. Another uprooting. Another upheaval of the Trevor hearth.

"That's exactly the point, Miss Christine. He insists on immediate possession, and that's why he's willing to pay the price."

When Mr. Graves at last withdrew, he left the girl with but one clear-cut impression — the Trevors were without a home.

The specter of homelessness haunted her in troubled dreams that night. Always she saw herself and the children standing on the roadside, their household possessions cluttered about them, hungry-eyed, gaunt, beseeching passers-by for shelter.

The specter kept close beside her in the hour of her dancing lesson, and weighted her feet and spirit.

"No, no, not that way," scolded the professor for the tenth time. "That is worse than nothing. You are not, as you say, in spirits. I, too, am not in spirits. *Hein,* it is household troubles that lie here." His hands went to his heart. "You do not know of some young girl, *ma chérie,* who would take into the country a very ill baby? My niece's baby — she herself lies face to face with death. No? *Eh, bien.* I must find some one at once. You shall dance no more to-day." He brought his hands down in crashing discord on the keys, and so he dismissed her.

For a time she wandered disconsolately about the city streets, and though she stood before a shop window full five minutes at a time, she could not afterwards recall anything that window contained.

Her aimless steps brought her at the lunch hour to the entrance of the Emporium. Suddenly her promise to Jennie Chubb glinted through her memory.

With the impulsiveness that was so strong a part of her temperament she plunged down the steps to the electric-lighted, evil-smelling basement. She made her way as rapidly as she could through the crowds jostling one another in the narrow aisles before counters heaped with tawdry ribbons, high-scented soaps, coarsely made but fashionably cut shoes and slippers and the flotsam and jetsam that the basement department stores display to tempt those of the meager purse.

At the counter where men's hose were arranged in colors brighter than any rainbow human eye has seen, she looked expectantly for Jennie Chubb. Perhaps she had already gone to lunch.

"Jennie Chubb? She got canned last week. No, we ain't none of us seen her since."

Outside in the sunlight Christine stopped to fill her lungs with fresh air. For a moment she hesitated, her brows twitching into a frown. She was tired, dispirited, hungry. She would go home. A street car bounding over the rails drew her attention. Atwater Place. Jennie Chubb lived in Atwater Place. She swung herself up the steps of the car.

Absent-mindedly she looked out at the dusty streets blazing in the noon-day sun, as the car rattled along. Her thoughts were a curious jumble. So much had happened since she had last seen Jennie Chubb. She had given up Cort. She had decided that dancing was to be the golden ladder by which she would climb to fame and wealth. She had learned her heart's secret. Douglas Barton had made his choice, and the Trevors would soon be without a roof.

She descended at the end of the car-route, and walked rapidly, with the freedom and suppleness of early youth, through two dingy squares before she arrived at the shabby, three-storied, tipsily slanting wooden building that Jennie Chubb called home. Her repeated ring of the bell brought no answer. She was already half-way down the rickety steps when the door was pulled violently open and she heard her name.

"I'm here alone to-day," Jennie Chubb spoke breathlessly. One hand held a faded kimono together. "I — I was in bed when you rang, and hurried" — she stopped for breath — "as fast as I could."

Several times in her ascent of the long dark flights of stairs which led to her cell-like room on the top story, she had to stop to ease her labored breathing.

"I'm pretty bad to-day," she said, throwing herself on a cot by the one window the room boasted. "I got more cold yesterday. My limousine was in the shop and I just had to go on foot. You see, my diamond tiara got broke at the ball the night before, and my dressmakers phoned me I mustn't miss another fittin'. So what could I do?" Her laugh trailed off into a hard, racking cough.

Christine's eyes were dark with pity.

Almost immediately Jennie rattled on again, "I've lost my job again. Got canned Saturday night, but one thing that cheers the poor workin' girl, she spent her last cent on a doctor yesterday, and he told her she hadn't a trace of the con. 'It's a bad cold,' he says, 'which'll land you into pneumonia if you don't look out, and what you need is milk and plenty of fresh eggs and rest and the country.' So it's the country for me, Miss Trevor," she said, with a defiant lift of the chin.

Still Christine said nothing. Instinctively she knew Jennie's nimble tongue would run on, unaided.

"After I saw you, I thought hard about what you said, lame dogs and all that, and I made up my mind I'd go straight, and I wrote him that, and I meant it, and then, 'cause I wouldn't stand no freshness from our new boss, he up and canned me, and I've tried, honest I have, to find another job, but it just seems like there ain't no job for Jennie Chubb in this great little old town. And then, this mornin' when it looks like I was down and out, three cents to my name and three weeks' rent to the bad, and the landlady anxious-like, I got this." She fumbled for a moment under her pillow, then drew out a letter. "It's from him — he hadn't got my other yet, and to cinch me, he — he sent me a check. It looks like fate, Miss Trevor, honest to God it does." She moved restlessly on her cot. "I wouldn't hurt you for worlds, Miss Trevor." Quick tears gathered in her eyes.

"You won't be hurting me, Jennie. It's only yourself you have to think about. And he's less than nothing to me now."

Jennie stared through her tears. "You didn't throw him over?"

Christine nodded.

"Well, I never!" After a short moment of silence, Jennie said, in a tone curiously blended of regret and triumph, "So I did get even, after all."

"It wasn't getting even. It was doing me a good turn."

"Huh! You wouldn't have him, 'cause he was after the likes of me, I suppose. If I'd 'a' been some dressed-up doll or a swell chorus girl, you'd 'a' forgiven him soon enough." Fire snapped in the blue eyes which seemed preposterously large now for the emaciated face.

"Jennie, you showed me he didn't have my heart."

Christine's candor was disarming. The thin lips lost their angry curve. "It'll be no job for you to pick up another rich guy, you —" She stopped on half a word, and with frank envy absorbed every detail of Christine's appearance. She was tailored in white, and correct from her white pumps to her wide white hat. Slowly Jennie's eyes traveled from her visitor's garb to her face with its exquisite skin, delicately molded features, eyes of brown with flashing lights of gold and the tendrils of red-gold hair that curled about either ear. "You with your looks," she finished sulkily.

"No more rich guys for me, Jennie," Christine's laugh rang out. "I'm a real working-woman now, and am going to earn several livings. Don't look so — unbelieving. It's the truth. But I didn't come here to talk about myself. It's you and your cold I'm interested in, and —" A nearby church-clock drowned out the rest of her words with its resonant peal.

"Two o'clock! Mercy me, Jennie, I haven't kept you from your lunch?"

Jennie laughed a short, unmirthful laugh. "I'm not lunchin' today. I dined last night with the Vanderbilts, you know, and I've a delicate digestion, and —"

Something compelling in Christine's regard brought her up short, and tears of weakness filled her eyes. "All I've had since yesterday noon's a glass of milk," she half sobbed.

Christine was already halfway out of the door when she turned to ask, "How far is the nearest restaurant?"

"There ain't no fit eatin' joints round here, but on the corner of Atwater and Bleeker, there's a swell little delicatessen. Oh, Miss Trevor, you're a brown-eyed angel!"

The brown-eyed angel did some rapid thinking while she was making hurried but lavish purchases, and by the time she had arranged the food as temptingly as she could on Jennie's rickety table, her plan of action was definitely mapped out. She waited, however, until both Jennie and she had taken the edge off their young healthy appetites before she began. Then in a matter-of-fact way, as if she were merely reiterating an opinion expressed but a moment before, she remarked, "Yes, the country's exactly what you need. Plenty of fresh air, and heaps of fresh eggs and milk and chicken."

Jennie's eyes glistened, and unconsciously her lips parted with eagerness. Then the light died out of her face. "You ain't advisin' me to do it, are you?" she cried, in passionate disappointment. Another disillusion — this idol, too, had clay-made feet.

"I most certainly am advising you to go to the country, and —"

Jennie interrupted rudely, "What's your game? To get even with him?"

Christine apparently did not hear the interruption. "Are you fond of children, Jennie?"

"I'm the oldest of seven, three boys and four girls in our family," she said slowly, after a full moment's pause, "and I miss the kiddies so that sometimes it seems as if I'd die if I didn't have just a sight of 'em."

"Why don't you go back home?" Christine filled the other's glass with milk for the third time.

"Too darn' — 'shamed and proud, I s'pose. I ran away from home when I was seventeen with a drummer. The old yarn, you know, young and kind of pretty and sick and tired of a little burg. It wasn't my fault I didn't go wrong. He got drunk the minute we struck the city, and I flew the coop." Another long silence, in which Jennie's eyes were at the bottom of the now empty milk-glass. "I learned my lesson that night. I've never gone wrong yet, but," she said, with a bitter sigh, "I'm at the end of my rope now."

Christine was quick to see and press an advantage. "I know a sick kiddie who ought to go to the country right away, but his mother's too ill to take him, and to find just the right person —" Artfully she paused; then she went on, "I suppose that wouldn't appeal to you."

"A starvin' dog don't throw a bone away 'cause it ain't a T steakbone. Tell me all you know about the sick kid, and its ma."

Christine told all she knew. At the end of a half hour she was leading the way down the rickety flight of steps. She and Jennie Chubb were bound for the Professor's.

"Oh, wait a sec'," Jennie cried, at the bottom of the first flight, and began laboriously to ascend again.

It seemed to Christine's strained nerves all of an hour — in reality it was no more than ten minutes — before Jennie made her way down the stairs again. At the first street corner she stopped and posted a letter.

" I sent back that check," she said, eyes averted. " I told him I was leavin' for the country, and I'm goin' straight. Here's our car."

CHAPTER XX

CHRISTINE DRIVES DR. DENTON'S CAR

A letter from Cort lay on her dressing-table when Christine wearily crept into her room late that afternoon. Without an instant's hesitation she thrust it unopened into her desk-drawer and turned the key. That chapter in her life was closed, she told herself grimly.

But her thoughts were busy with that closed chapter of her life and the events of the afternoon so curiously interwoven with it, when she wandered into the garden in the cool of the evening. The Professor and Jennie had taken to each other at first sight. Her lips curved into a tenderly mirthful smile at the memory of the Professor's exuberant joy over the quickly-made arrangements, and Jennie's parting words, "I'm your slave for life, you brown-eyed angel," kept running through her head like the refrain of a song.

The night was vivid, starry, lit by a moon which was riding "like a golden galleon in a heavy sea," and the air was still as a held breath. She was suddenly swept into a realization of the ecstasy and beauty of life that was throbbing all about her, and she felt as if the whole world were moving to a rhythm.

And because it was a night for romance, she fell a-dreaming, and her dreams held her, with shining eyes, and caught breath, and teeth denting her lower lip. Then in imagination she grew bolder. Fancy created the loved one's form. They walked close together in the garden paths, gazed deep in each other's eyes and held sweet converse.

She heard footfalls, and, turning, saw Freddy Blue coming towards her over the moon-silvered grass.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" Christine reproached her. "I'd have gone halfway to meet you."

"I decided on the spur of the moment." There was a queer tenseness to her voice. After a moment of utter quiet, "I stopped in at the post-office on my way to the drug-store just now." Another silence. "There was a note from Doug — I didn't know — I haven't seen him for a week — for some time. He said you knew."

This unexpected show of feeling so rare to Freddy's serene nature threw the other into a puzzled surprise. It was all of a minute before she could bring herself to say, "Why, I thought you knew."

She stole a look at her over-tall friend. Freddy's mouth was set and her eyes were frowning.

"Tell me — everything." Freddy suddenly caught her breath quiveringly and the stern look melted into pleading, "We've been life-long friends, you know."

"Doug said you had." Then with characteristic vividness Christine described the ugly scene in the Barton garden, of which she had been an inadvertent witness, and the drive along the river's edge, but she withheld any reference to Douglas' confession of love. That was too intimate, too much his secret for her to discuss even with his life-long friend.

For a time Freddy did not speak. She was letting her eyes wander over her companion with the thought that even the starlight was kind to her, making of her hair a mist, and lending a nymph-like whiteness and beauty to her slender form.

"Everyone loves you," she said in a choked voice. "I don't wonder, you're — beautiful," she added, and sped away.

"How perfectly peculiar!" Christine stared after the hurrying figure in genuine puzzlement. "She can't think Doug's in love with me."

A thought came which hurt her inconceivably. "Besides, what possible difference can it make to her? She has Docky. Well, I'll disabuse her mind of that crazy notion when I see her again."

But the next meeting with Freddy did not occur until other matters had erased the memory of that conversation in the moonlit garden, at least, from Christine's mind.

Afterwards, in recalling the events of the next day — and Christine took a curious pleasure in a mental rehearsal of certain occurrences of that day — she told herself things started in to happen right away.

From the breakfast-table she was called to the telephone. Mr. Graves' monotone greeted her. How was she feeling this fine summer day? And were the young brother and the twins enjoying the best of health? Would it suit her pleasure to have him send his car for her, say about the middle of the afternoon, to look over a couple of new bungalows at the edge of town? Yes, the sale had gone through without a hitch, as Dr. Denton had been called back unexpectedly for an important consultation and his signature had been secured for the deed. He, Mr.

Graves, had promised the newcomer possession within a week's time.

Christine's ears took in but little after the news of Docky's return. For a breath the whole world rocked dizzily and even when it steadied itself again, the blood was still racing in her veins and her heart seemed to be beating in her throat.

"At three, yes," she heard herself say in an unfamiliar voice, and blindly hooking up the receiver, threw herself into the nearest chair, and buried her face in her hands.

So it happened that she did not see Laurie quietly emerge from the living-room and make what had become for him a daily pilgrimage to the letter-box on the corner. The grimly set lips, the cheeks drained of color and the pain-darkened eyes would have told her what that journey cost.

But Christine was quick to see his unusual pallor when a half-hour later she joined him under the great elm for the morning history lesson.

"Are things a bit off to-day?" She tried to make her tone unconcerned. Laurie hated any reference to his suffering or infirmity.

He fanned himself languidly with the cover of his book. "It's a trifle warmish, isn't it? But isn't it jolly here? And will you look at those blue, blue larkspurs over there? It's nice to be out here among all these blossoming things and the butterflies and birds."

He drew a deep breath of content.

"I wish for your sake we could stay," Christine said, unintentionally aloud. How she should break the news of their sudden departure from this quaint old home to the lame boy had been the burden of her thoughts since Mr. Graves had broached the subject in the garden a few nights before.

In countless ways she had come to realize that Laurie had grown passionately fond of his father's boyhood home. The very thought of the sudden uprooting and the change to the city's heat made her heart sink with foreboding. Her gaze rested searchingly upon him, and she was filled with new alarm at the strikingly apparent frail hold the boy had on life.

Laurie laid the book face down on his lap and looked out through the trees with eyes that sought the far-away horizon before he said quietly, "Must we give this up, too?"

Christine could only trust herself to nod.

"When?"

How she admired the gallant courage of his smile!

"Soon. In a week, Mr. Graves said."

He caught her hand suddenly. His thoughts were never for himself. "That's going to be rough on you, Christie. You're so busy now with your dancing. But I'll help 'Melia. You'd be surprised to know how many things she found for me to do when we tore up before."

He meditated a moment, while she tried to wink away the sudden mist that blurred her sight again.

"It's been nice here." He stopped to listen to the scolding of a bright-eyed squirrel which perched saucily on a branch a few feet above the boy's head to pay his usual morning visit, then he went on in a dreamy undertone, "But things may be even nicer where we're going. Who knows?"

"Who knows?" Christine tried for a gay tone, but she failed ignominiously.

"Anyhow, it doesn't matter where we are or where we live. Father's always with us, and we always have that wonderful St. Mark's fund to think about. I'll never forget how old Graves looked when I told him father didn't need a monument. The fund was his monument. People would always remember him by that."

It took all Christine's courage to put the question, "What did Mr. Graves say to that?"

"Not much. He just wiped and wiped and wiped his glasses. I thought he'd never get through, and then he said, 'Always hold fast to your faith in your father, boy, no matter what happens.' As if I had to be told that!" Laurie laughed in airiest scorn. "And I'm never going to let the twins forget him either. But they're so young — Oh, you'll be late for your dancing lesson, Christie," he exclaimed, as a neighboring church-clock pealed the hour sonorously; "let's up and at it!"

Christine found the place in her history notes and the lesson went on briskly, though now and then her eyes rested dreamily on the old-fashioned garden, with its wealth of roses and lupines and heavy-headed peonies and bird and butterfly life. She had so much to think about. But in spite of the sadness that lurked in the ever-present thought of their impending departure from all this loveliness, her heart sang. Docky was back.

Then a thought was born which sent a flaming color into her cheeks and made her heart stumble against her breast. Could she keep her secret from those grave gray eyes which always seemed to plumb the depths of her soul? She must. She set her teeth hard against her lower lip. To betray herself even by a word or look would be to earn her undying scorn of herself. The well-poised head was lifted upright with determination even as she gently corrected Laurie on a list of causes of the Wars of the Roses.

"I'm a dull boy to-day," he said, with a pretense of lightness, after he had stumbled through the next outline in the lesson, "but my thoughts will go chasing off like those butterflies, and my ears are full of that sweet *chick-a-dee-dee-dee*. Oh, but wouldn't it be great to be in the woods to-day," he said, his voice vibrating with sudden longing, "and find the thrush that's been singing, singing, and chase the will-o'-the-wisp till you couldn't chase any more, and follow every path you liked?"

"Perhaps I can get back early enough to —"

But he broke in, "Don't mind me. It's just this peach of a day that's made things stir around inside of me, and set me to wishing. Besides, you haven't time. You'll be late for your dancing-lesson," he reminded her, for a second time.

"The Professor'll gobble me up, bones, feathers and all if I am." She had already started on a run toward the house when a sharp exclamation from Laurie brought her instantly to his side again.

"Look," he laughed, in sudden amusement.

She looked. The twins were half carrying, half dragging what appeared to Christine's mystified gaze to be a small tin bathtub.

"It's a mud-turtle tub," Laurie enlightened her.

"Oh, that little monkey almost took a header into the tub. Dilly," he raised his voice, "have a care; you're tipping the tub on your side, and the turtles'll all spill out."

"What'll those imps think up next?" Christine groaned, watching the twins make a gallant, if precarious, advance.

"We got twenty new baby turtles 'n' lots of mamas 'n' papas from Billy Gray this morning," shouted Dilly, to the accompaniment of slopping water, "'n' we only gave him our ice skates 'n' our sweaters 'n'—" The rest of the bargain was drowned out by a roar from Daffy, who suddenly sat down on the path, panting and exhausted by her labors, but still shrilly protesting that her running-mate was not equally sharing the burden.

Cautiously Christine drew nearer the watery home of the mud-turtles. Truth to tell, she had no fondness for what she mentally termed slimy, squirming, all-legs-and-tail-and-precious-little-head creatures. Experience had taught her that the twins had an ever-ready inventive genius for original games, and from experience, too, she had grown used to the fact that they would go to any lengths to make the game a good game.

"What is it this time?" Christine stopped at a comparatively safe distance and craned her neck. To her excited fancy hundreds and hundreds of those slimy, squirming, all-legs-and-tail-and-precious-little-head creatures appeared to be wriggling on top of one another in the half-empty tub. Involuntarily she wrinkled her nose in disgust.

Daffy turned up to her eyes blue as the sky, and big with reproachful surprise. "Don't you like 'em, poor itty-witty sings?"

"Um — I can't say I'm overcome with affection. But whatever are you going to do with the collection?"

Excitement brought Daffy to her feet. She faced her sister with an important air. "Somebody's got to s'port the Trevor family, 'n' we're going to do it."

Christine groaned inwardly. She recognized the quotation. The twins must have "little-pitchered" when she was defending her dancing lessons to Amelia. "What's the great idea?" In spite of herself a smile would touch her lips.

"You feed 'em 'n' feed 'em till they're big 'n' fat." Daffy moved close to her sister, and half whispered the rest of the recipe for growing rich quick, "'N' then you sell 'em for soup."

Dilly came promptly to his sister's support with, "'N' turtle soup's a awful delickacksy — Billy Gray says so."

Christine stared in amazement; then her glad, free laugh rang out. "Well, as long as you don't intend to make that soup delicacy yourselves, I suppose you can't get into any real mischief." A sudden thought made her swing about when she had already gone a dozen paces across the lawn. "But for the love of Betsy, keep a ball and chain on every turtle's foot, so he doesn't escape. I wouldn't fancy meeting one of them in the dead o' night."

Afterwards the roguish gleam that sparkled in Daffy's wide-eyed innocent stare flitted back into Christine's memory, and she wondered that she had not paused for a word of inquiry or warning. But at this precise moment her head was full of nothing but the hailstorm of reproachful words that would rattle about her ears when she presented herself before the Professor half an hour or more after her appointed time. The Professor did not disappoint her. He greeted her with a scolding that did not abate for full ten minutes, then because he was in an unusually exacting mood that morning, kept her to her task until an hour after lunch-time.

Consequently she was late, too, when she slipped into Mr. Graves' cab that afternoon.

"I'm to drive you to Isabelle Avenue," the chauffeur told her. "Mr. Graves said he'd be there three sharp, and believe me, it'll be three sharp," he added, more to himself than her.

"A waste of a good three-quarters of an hour, Miss Christine," was Mr. Graves' greeting as, watch in hand, he assisted her from the cab. "And this is a very busy day for me, but there, there, my dear"—his testiness melting surprisingly under the warmth of her smile—"one must make allowances, I suppose, for a popular young lady with a thousand demands on her time. This is the living-room." He led the way into a tiny box of a room. "Not large, but—"

A feeling of dismay swept over Christine as she followed her guide from one small room into another. "We'd be cooped up here like chickens," she began, but he interrupted with a snappiness quite foreign to his usual paternal tone, "I've run my legs off to find something suitable, and it's not to be had. That other bungalow directly opposite," they were standing now on the diminutive porch, "was rented half an hour ago, the agent told me, while I was — er — waiting for you. This is the only house anywhere about that's fit to live in."

"It's just about the size of a doll-house father had made for me when I was a small tad, but it'll have to do, I suppose."

"We're in luck to get this. There's a pair of lovers that have been haunting the place for weeks — I know, for he's a stenographer in our office — but the rent's been a trifle high."

Christine had already settled herself in the cab, the key to the new Trevor home stowed safely away in her hand-bag, when Mr. Graves poked his head in the window, and innocently loosed a thunderbolt. "By the way, it came to my knowledge this morning that it's that queer old curmudgeon who lives next door that's bought your house, and —"

"Joshua Barton," Christine broke in excitedly. "There must be some mistake."

Mr. Graves shook his head. "It leaked out most unexpectedly. I myself don't understand, but old Barton doubtless does. Perhaps he's afraid some real estate concern'll swoop down on this peaceful backwater, and subdivide into twenty-foot lots and bring out the working-class. Joshua's an exclusive old boy, I'm told," he added, with rare levity, "but his money's as good as another's and he paid a good price."

"It can't make any possible difference," Christine assured herself when alone, and she tried to plunge mentally into the thousand-and-one details that moving always necessitates.

But her thoughts reverted again and again to the subject, and the new owner of "Rain-on-the-Roof" was uppermost in her mind when she sped up the front steps of her home, and almost into Amelia's arms.

"It's you," gasped the old woman and fell back against the wall, trembling so that she could barely stand.

"What is it? What's happened? The twins? Not Laurie!" The cry was wrenched from Christine's heart.

Amelia tried to control her quivering lips, but she opened her mouth once or twice before the words would come, "He ain't dead. Not that, but oh, my God, my God! I thought he was when they brought him in." In spite of her determined efforts, great hard sobs racked her. "I've sent for our doctor. I thought you was him. No bones broke, praise be, and he's sleepin' now like a babe," she went on, her words rushing forth now pell-mell, "and he knew me from the start, his poor old 'Melia who'd be glad to die for him. I must get back to him. No, no, me first."

But Christine had already leaped up the steps, and was kneeling by her brother's side when Amelia tottered in. Misery was seated at the bedside, alert for an opportunity to serve the boy.

"He ain't moved or stirred for the last half hour. He's sleepin' like he was dead tired," she whispered, in answer to Christine's low-voiced inquiry, "except once he opened his eyes and called you. Then 'Melia came and he smiled and was off again like he is now."

"Laurie, Laurie." Christine pressed her lips to the hand which lay, fine and exquisite as a hand modelled in marble, on the coverlet.

The dark eyes fluttered, opened, smiled. "Christie, I'm glad I haven't lost you, too." She had to put her ear close to his lips to catch the words; then as if a weight lay on his eyelids he closed them and slept again.

"How soon is Docky coming? Did his office-girl know?" Christine inquired of Amelia in an unsteady voice.

"He wasn't in. She thought he'd come soon, but I couldn't make her understand real clear-like what the trouble was, there was such a buzzin' in the phone, and I tried and tried, but she didn't seem to make out, so I told her to say he should come here right away."

"I'll try." Christine found relief in action, but to her dismay learned that the doctor's line was out of order. Workmen were busy, however, with its repair. She should make the call again within a half hour.

She was moving restlessly about her bedroom, stopping now and then to pick up a small object and set it down unseeingly when Amelia knocked at her door and entered simultaneously. She was carrying a small tray with a service of tea.

"Sit down here, 'Melia." Touched to the quick by the old woman's devotion, Christine drew forward an easy-chair. "It'd choke me. You need it more than I. Let me serve you."

"Misery's with him. I was goin' to serve you, and then drink myself. We need to keep our strength for what's comin'. If only our doctor'd hurry." She made a movement toward the window, but Christine pressed her back in her chair.

"I'll phone again in fifteen minutes," she glanced at her wrist-watch, "and then, if he's not in, it'll have to be some other doctor."

The old woman's hands trembled so violently that Christine had to rescue her cup of tea. "Another doctor'd kill him sure. No other doctor'd understand. It's got to be our doctor who knows —" She broke off with a significant little lift of her eyes.

"Knows what, 'Melia?"

"'Tain't the boy's body this time. It's his heart," she answered irrelevantly between gulps of tea.

"Tell me what you mean." There was a note of the old imperiousness in the girl's manner, as she fixed the tear-stained eyes with her unwavering glance.

"Not now. I must get back to my boy!"

Christine was not to be denied, though she had to effect a compromise. She set a chair for Amelia outside Laurie's room where her whispers would not disturb him, and where through the partly opened door she could watch his every movement.

"I was finishin' up my darnin' in the back yard," Amelia began tremulously, "and Laurie was fiddlin' away under the big tree, and the twins were laughin' their heads off over some prank or other with their mud-turtles, and I must have dozed a minute. It was warm, and my rheumatiz kept me awake considerable last night." Her tone was apologetic. "Anyhow, first thing I know I heard Laurie's voice excited-like and half-cryin', and there he was, talkin' away for dear life to another cripple-boy 'bout his own age. I got up to see what the matter was, and I heard him say, ''Tain't true, Joe. There's a mistake somehow. My father gave his last cent for that fund. You couldn't 've lost your money,' and then that boy laughed kind of scornful-like, ' Huh, all you know. We did lose our money and your father was nothin' but a darned old thief.' "

There was a catch in Christine's voice which was husky and toneless. " I always hoped he'd never know."

" And then my blessed boy went, with that — that Joe boy to the car, and he was helpin' him up the steps when somehow my blessed lamb slipped and fell, I thought clean under the wheels. I screamed and ran and screamed and ran but that man-servant next door got to him first, and carried him in, and helped me put him to bed. My hands shook so. It was that man Mark that said he'd not broken a bone, but just got a bit of a shakin' and —"

" Time's up. I'm going to phone, but remember, 'Melia, if Docky's not in, it must be some other. We daren't wait any longer."

" Please, please, Dr. Denton, not any other doctor," came faintly in Laurie's voice from the darkened room.

" I didn't realize I was speaking so loud." Christine crept in contritely to the bedside, and dropped to her knees. " It'll be Dr. Denton if I have to bring him myself."

Christine kept her word. She brought him herself, though it was not until many hours later. The telephone was still out of repair, and she found the office closed when she finally gained his office-building after what seemed to her an interminable trolley ride.

It was growing dark, and a fine mist-like rain had begun to fall when she entered a car bound for his home.

Dr. Denton had gone out of town to operate late in the afternoon and would not be back until the next morning, Mrs. Anderson, the doctor's housekeeper, volubly informed her. He had phoned her not to prepare dinner or breakfast, but wouldn't Miss Christine stop on for a bite?

Miss Christine wouldn't. Did Mrs. Anderson know where the doctor had gone?

He had taken the mid-afternoon train for Chester and had promised Mrs. Anderson to deliver a parcel to her daughter-in-law. No, there was no other train for Chester until one-something in the morning. Yes, Chester was that little mill-town some fifty miles upstate on the Dunbar River.

A sudden determination pulsed in Christine. With the fewest words possible she explained the urgency of her need for Doctor Denton's services. Then she said resolutely, bracing her shoulders with the air of one refusing discussion, "I'm going to take Docky's car and bring him back."

"But, my dear," Mrs. Anderson began, in bewildered protest, "you — a young girl — at this hour of the night and in such weather —"

The ring of Christine's voice was unmistakable. "Give me the key to the garage — please."

Mrs. Anderson meekly surrendered the key.

It was not until Christine had plunged northward, and the lights strung along the river were speeding past the rain-fretted wind-shield like pale bubbles, that any doubt assailed her. Suppose she failed to find Docky. Mrs. Anderson had spoken vaguely of a hotel but had fancied that the doctor would put up for the night at the home of one of his confrères. Suppose he had gone to Chester for a series of operations, as she knew was frequently the case, and wouldn't be able to return with her.

Her young body grew taut. She had promised Laurie, and she'd die before she'd break her word. Laurie's life was at stake and only Dr. Denton could save it. Docky should return with her. She'd make him — how, she didn't know.

The purr of the motor deepened; the river sped by like a dark ribbon. Each moment the downpour seemed thicker, quicker. A wind, too, had risen, which began to tear impishly through the open windows at her hat. She unpinned her hat and tucked it under her feet, as she drove the car forward at high speed.

She knew by heart every bend and turn in the road until it deflected from the river. A sudden panic overwhelmed her when she swung into a patch of woods black as the night. Horrid stories of robbers utilizing this strip of woods as a rendezvous flashed into her overstimulated mind and every minute she expected to see masked figures dart out at her from behind dripping trees. But she saw only the wavering illumination of her own headlight, and when once she had to bring the car to a full stop to make sure of a sharp turn in the path, she heard nothing but the hoot of an owl and the shrieking of the wind-tossed boughs high above her head.

Out into the open road again. The rain was coming in torrents now and the wind had whipped itself into a gale. Her eyes were growing weary from the strain of peering through the curtain of rain. Her hand and arm were beginning to feel numb. It was no easy task now to keep the wheels in the heavy, slippery ruts. Once or twice, on the river road, she had had to turn out for another automobile, but for the most part she had undisputed possession of the road, and for that she was thankful, for now the way had narrowed, with sharp declivities on either side.

Her eyes had closed several times in spite of herself and her thoughts were becoming a curious jumble, when a loud honking and the glare of headlights that seemed close upon her brought her up sharply. Hurriedly she glanced on either side. Was she a skilful enough driver to turn out in safety? She would have to — there was nothing else to do. Perhaps she could back her car —

She had already thrown the engine into reverse when she was startled by a second blast of the automobile horn, air-ripping and prolonged. Again it came. She shut down her engine.

"You can't back up," a voice shouted out of the darkness. "There's a fierce gully on either side."

"What shall I do?" called Christine, in a voice that shook with fright.

"A woman, by all that's true." Her ears, pricked for every sound, caught the words, though spoken in a lower tone. Again a shout, this time a command. "Wait, we'll help you turn."

"If you'll run your car ahead about fifteen paces, madam," came from a dripping figure in motor coat and cap standing beside her car, "you can —"

"Docky!" the girl at the wheel broke in with a sob. "It's you, really you! I found you, after all!"

Questions and answers were exchanged as rapidly as human tongue could form words.

Fifteen minutes later, with Dr. Denton at the wheel, Christine was being whirled homewards.

"I'll never cease to be thankful we stopped you when we did," he broke the first little silence that had fallen. "A few feet more and —" An irrepressible shudder ran through him.

She looked up at him with a saucy little tilt of the chin. "You'd have been rid of a bothersome ward forever." Her laugh held a glad thrill. "Well, I'll never cease to be thankful I met you when I did, for you'd have been safely tucked away in bed at Dr. Crampton's by the time I reached Chester and I'd never, never have found you. Poor man, he looked as though he wanted to eat me up for carrying you off like this."

"He was counting on a good smoke and a jolly old before-bed chat. I'd promised to talk over with him some of the experiences of my New York visit."

The brown eyes flashed up to his. "I'm sorry, Docky, but Laurie —"

"Sorry, child; there's nothing for you to be sorry for. I'm sorry you tired yourself out in that wild drive. You certainly are a plucky girl, Goldilocks."

"Plucky, pouf! Not a bit of it! This drive's been the worst nightmare of my whole life." But in the darkness of the cab she smiled happily to herself.

A weight was beginning to oppress her eyelids, and she was finding it increasingly difficult to hold her head erect. There was something infinitely soothing in the steady motion of the car under the doctor's guidance and the beat of the rain against the wind-shield. Once, when he stopped the car to slip out and test a rear tire, the lashing of the wind-racked branches in the depths of the woods which before had stirred her to fear now soothed her as a lullaby.

"Very tired, little one?" Dr. Denton inquired, after a prolonged silence.

"No-o-o," she murmured sleepily, "only wondering and hoping and praying that Laurie's —" she broke off with a half-sob.

"From what you've told me, Laurie's suffering from a severe mental shock. We're going to pull him through, never fear." Dr. Denton moved closer, and inserted his arm under her drowsy head. "That's better, Goldilocks," he said, very quietly. "You can rest more comfortably so. I'll wake you in good time."

So with her head pillowed on his shoulder, Christine slept like a tired child. Once or twice she shifted her head or stirred a bit uneasily, but the rocking motion of the car and the reassuring support of the arm that encircled her lulled her into sleep again. And the rosy dreams of first love came to her, and thrilled her to ecstasy. Once she opened her eyes, still heavy with slumber. She thought lips had touched hers light as a breath with a whispered, "My little love-girl," and her heart beat stormily.

"Where am I?" she murmured dreamily, and for answer Dr. Denton drew her head closer against him in the darkness of the car that was flying forward at unabated speed. "With me, Goldilocks," he said, in his quiet voice, and she was fast asleep again.

Through the thrall of a dream vibrated a strain of purest music, "I love you, Christine," and with the mist of the dream still in her eyes and the melody of that voice still in her ears, she awoke to the sound of her name, "Christine, Christine. Here we are, Goldilocks, safe at home." The next instant she felt herself lifted out of the car in strong arms and carried up the steps.

The rain had ceased, but the wind still beat high. Suddenly from behind the shifting cloud-wrack the moon magically appeared, and sent a flood of radiance over the quiet night-world.

"How beautiful!" breathed Christine, her face upturned to the great silver plaque, as the doctor set her on her feet on the veranda.

"How beautiful!" Dr. Denton repeated, but his eyes were not on the face of the moon.

It was all of a half-hour before he came to her. She was lying on the living-room davenport where he had insisted on establishing her while she waited for him to make an examination of Laurie's injuries.

"It's as I thought. He's had a tremendous nervous shock, but we're going to keep him. It'll be all of a month, though, before he'll be up and around again."

Tears streamed unheeded down her cheeks.

"We're going to keep him. I was so afraid —"

Her cheek against the pillow and her long yellow braids tossed back of her head, she was drifting off to sleep, when a sudden thought brought her bolt upright. "Docky said Laurie won't be up for a month, and we've got to give up this house to that old Barton monster within a week."

CHAPTER XXI

CHRISTINE'S SURPRISE BASKET

The next morning developed a mystery that Christine was long in puzzling out. She was making a descent of the stairs, her feet hardly touching the steps, and a song on her lips, for Laurie had passed a quiet night, when there was a peremptory ring of the bell. A diminutive messenger-boy with a huge box was fidgeting before the door.

"Master Laurie Trevor," he sang out shrilly, and thrusting the package into her hands, ran down the steps, whistling loudly after the fashion of his kind.

Quickly she threw off the brown paper wrappings. A sheaf of tea roses artistically combined with forget-me-nots shed a fragrance into the room.

A faint color crept into Laurie's white cheeks as she laid the dewy beauties against his face.

"Who sent them?"

The feebleness of his voice cut her with a bitter sharpness, but she answered gaily, "I've hunted and hunted, but there's no sign of a card and no hint, either, of any florist. You sly little mite, 'fess up, who's the fair lady?"

But Laurie only shook his head with a wan smile, and wondered who the giver could be. He was as genuinely mystified as she.

The mystery deepened the following day. The self-same scene before the front door reënacted itself. This time the offering was a basket of luscious fruit. And so anonymous gifts of fruit or flowers reached Laurie day by day, and though once Christine succeeded in detaining the elusive messenger-boy, she was not equally successful in eliciting any information that satisfied. Apparently, all he knew was that a man presented himself in the office early each morning with a package to be delivered to Master Laurie Trevor. No, he didn't know what the man looked like. He hadn't noticed. Yes, he supposed he could notice, but that wasn't what he was hired for. His business was to deliver the goods. And no tips or bribes could tempt that messenger boy of the snub-nose and freckled face.

So though the unfailing daily arrival of the gifts fired her curiosity, Christine had to admit herself baffled, and presently in the stress of other matters, the unsolved problem ceased to tease.

Nearly the whole day after Laurie's accident slipped by before Christine could bring herself to carry out a plan that had formed itself the night before in her last waking moments. And then it was a dictum of Amelia's that made her take herself in hand and perform the hated task.

"It fair breaks my heart to see what a set-back my boy's had," mourned the old nurse at the breakfast-table. "What's to be done about our movin'?" she demanded the next moment, as if struck by a new thought.

Christine's eyebrows came together in a frown. "That worried me half the night. Docky said it would be a month before he'd be up and around, and to move him —"

"It'd kill him, sure as fate," Amelia cut in with furious intensity. "We can't move."

"We must. Mr. Graves promised we'd be out by the end of the week. If it were anyone else but Mr. Barton, that old monster —"

Daffy, who had been conducting a heated argument with her twin, and had appeared oblivious to her elders' conversation, broke out in a loud cry, "He said he'd throw us out in the street like beggars, 'n' now — 'n' now he's going to do it."

"No, he isn't, dear," Christine soothed the weeping child. "We're not going to live on the street, but in the tiniest little doll's house you ever saw."

Through streaming tears Daffy looked up to inquire, "Where'll our mud-turtles stay?"

"That's a poser. The whole outfit isn't much bigger than your mud-turtle tub, but I'm sure you can take some —"

"All the mamas 'n' the papas 'n' lots of babies?" queried Dilly, and Christine's nod sent the twins scampering toward the back yard to make a judicious selection of the pet-turtles that were to accompany them.

From the dining-room window she watched them intently a moment, then with a quaint humility she turned to Amelia who was busily piling the breakfast dishes on a tray. "I'm not the same Christine Trevor I used to be, am I, 'Melia?"

Amelia looked at her steadily for a fraction of a second. There was a new sweetness about the girl, an exhalation of wistfulness. "You're gettin' more and more like your mother every day," the old woman mumbled and disappeared into the kitchen with suspicious haste.

When she returned several minutes later, Christine still stood at the window, her cheeks beautiful with a suffusion of color.

"I know now what's made the difference in me. I've learned to love — the twins and Laurie and —" she broke off. Her eyes had lost their quiet. They showed a glint of tears.

But Amelia had not noticed. Her mind held but one subject, her lame boy. "I tell you, Laurie can't be moved," she made the assertion as though following out an uninterrupted train of thought, "and I'd go down on my knees to a monster ten times hatefuller than Joshua Barton to save that lamb's life." With that she was gone.

Amelia's words repeated themselves in her mind when she crept into Laurie's room in the middle of the morning, and found him fast asleep. The deadly pallor of his face brought her ear close to his heart in a sudden agony of apprehension. He was breathing, but, oh, so faintly that again the fear that he would not stay with them assailed her.

He was sleeping, too, when she stood by his bedside midway between the hours of three and four, and again Amelia's words rang accusingly in her ear. For a long, long moment she stood there. Laurie's eyes opened, and he smiled, and put out his hand. Having found her fingers, he raised them shyly to his lips, and with a whispered, "It's so nice to wake up and find you here," floated off again on the stream of sleep.

Thrusting a hat on her head, Christine stole softly down the stairs, through the dining-room and vaulted the veranda rail. She would keep her errand a secret, until she should return, banners flying and proudly proclaim her victory over the monster, Joshua Barton.

On the lawn she quickened her already hurried pace to a run, but her steps lagged when she reached the clipped archway in the hedge that screened the "Lonely House." The warring of her moods stayed her for a breath. He had forbidden her to enter his grounds, and she had vowed by all that she held sacred never to address him by word or look. She couldn't break faith with herself. But perhaps Laurie's life was at stake. Her pride against his life.

With her head high poised, shoulders up and her steps firmly crunching the gravel of the path as if she were treading her pride under her heel, she advanced toward the garden-chair where the master of the house spent his afternoons. To her surprise the chair was unoccupied, but blankets, rugs and cushions were strewn about in great disorder as if the spot had been hastily abandoned.

Christine's eyes looked forth with a proud directness when Mark opened the door. Unquestionably he gasped when he saw her. "I — you —" he stammered, and stopped, a slow red mounting to the thin fringe of graying hair that lay along his forehead.

"I want to see Mr. Barton." The girl spoke with a grave deliberation.

"Mr. Barton!" For all of a minute the man seemed too overcome to speak. He stood, open-mouthed, as if amazed at her daring, and made no move to admit her.

"Yes; Mr. Barton," Christine repeated a bit impatiently, "But," she added hastily, with the flicker of a smile, "you needn't trouble to announce me."

The man suddenly seemed to come to a realization of his duties. "Yes, Miss, this way, Miss," he said, and led her into a hall that to her eyes, dazzled with sunlight, seemed dark as a tomb.

Before a door, closed and heavily curtained in velvet, he paused. "Perhaps I'd better warn — tell you, Miss, Mr. Barton's not in a very good way to-day. He met with — er — a slight accident a short time back, and he's not fully recovered himself."

The animation of curiosity was in Christine's voice. "I thought something must have happened — the cushions and things looked so tumbled about. Was he hurt?"

"Mostly his feelings, Miss." Mark drew his hand across his lips. Christine was certain he wiped away a smile. "He waked from his nap, he tells me, to find himself alive with — er — mud-turtles, Miss."

The gold-brown eyes lighted with a growing surprise, then, in spite of herself, she broke into a spontaneous laugh. The next instant she grew sober. "Those naughty twinnies. I'm afraid they haven't helped our cause."

A smile openly touched the man's lips for the first time. "It was a rare sight, Miss. The turtles were crawling over him thick as flies about a jelly-jar, and it almost cost me my position, but I had to laugh. How those little scamps ever managed it, but trust 'em to plan a bit of mischief! They're real young 'uns." An unmistakable note of admiration rang in his voice. "I took a fancy to 'em at first sight, but they're not like the lame 'un," he added, as if to himself. "Might I make so bold as to inquire of you, Miss, how his health is to-day?"

"He's a very little better, thank you, Mark. I'm so grateful to you for carrying him in, and —"

"Begging your pardon, Miss, for interrupting, but it was nothing. I wish I could have done a sight more. I've been thinking about him and wondering. You see, Mrs. Amelia promised to signal me every day how he is, but she's been too busy or she forgot, I fancy."

"Why didn't you telephone or come yourself?"

"You don't know Mr. Barton," was the man's significant reply. "You'd better go in now. He'll soon be working over his accounts, and no one is allowed to see him then. I have it. I'll serve tea while you are with him. Tea always — er — rather soothes him." With that he parted the curtains and opened the door for her.

She diffused with her entrance a radiance of youthful life into the dim, high-ceiled, old-fashioned room with its furniture of black walnut, massive and priceless. Despite the warmth of the July day, the master of the house sat muffled in shawls in a huge armchair before a grate-fire which was casting fantastic shadows on ceiling and wall.

"Why the devil don't you bring my tea?" he thundered at the sound of footfalls. "You know I'm suffering torments, you chucklehead."

A moment passed — a moment or a century.

"Mark has gone to get it," answered Christine quietly, over the stormy beating of her heart.

Joshua Barton twisted his head to look over his shoulder and stared. To Christine's excited fancy he seemed to be staring not at her, but through her, beyond her.

When he spoke, it was as if he were still in the daze of a dream. "Where did you come from?" His voice was choked and husky. "It's been years now, and I've been waiting — waiting. I knew you'd come."

Not a sound broke the stillness in the room for a brief interval of time but the snapping of the logs on the hearth. Suddenly the flames leaped high and illumined the face and form of the girl who stood uncertainly well within the room. A wave of blood surged to the old man's face and receded, leaving him pallid and shaking with passion. He struck his hand down on the chair-arm with a thunderous bang. "How dare you come here? Didn't I tell you I'd throw you out neck and crop if ever you showed your face again on my premises?"

"It took some courage to come in face of that threat," Christine had advanced to the arm-chair, and stood within range of his eye. She spoke calmly, though her nerves were tingling, and her heart beat in her throat. Let him carry out his threat. She was not afraid. She was afraid of nothing now. Laurie's life was her stake. "And if my love hadn't been stronger than my pride, I couldn't have made myself come."

"Love!" he hooted mockingly, and shot at her a glance of frankest scorn. "Love for me, I suppose. You're probably worried about my soul, and want me to subscribe to some old woman's home or a school for wild girls or some other fool enterprise to ensure me a seat in Paradise. But I tell you I won't give you a cent, not a cent, I say." He emphasized his last words with another smash of his fist against the wood of the chair.

For several long, endless moments after he finished the silence remained unbroken; then she said, "I don't want a cent from you. It's a favor that won't cost you —"

"A favor," he sneered. "You, you dare ask me for a favor. You — Trevor! Humph, I'll not go into that. Accounts are almost squared now," his laugh sent a bolt of fire through her. "Ha, ha! 'The mills of the gods grind slowly.' Your father had to come and beg on bended knees for a favor, oh, not for himself, to be sure," his sarcasm cut the girl like a whip-stroke. "It was for his precious St. Mark's fund. That was to buy him a front seat in heaven, I dare say."

"So it was you." Christine was hardly conscious that she spoke aloud. A fragment of Mr. Graves' confidence to Dr. Denton, overheard in the latter's office, started unbidden from a memory-cell. "I long to assure him with my own tongue he's the murderer of John Trevor, as fine a man as God ever set on this wicked old earth — had he negotiated that loan, there'd be dozens, yes, hundreds, of widows and orphans of St. Mark's that wouldn't be crying their eyes out this day —"

The quiet scorn of her tone lashed him into sudden fury. "Yes, it was I, and there are other scores to pay. You, it was you who turned my nephew against me. Oh, I know you and your kind. You coax the heart out of a man's breast with your pretty ways, and then toss it aside like a broken toy for another your fancy suggests. And you're not satisfied to turn that boy loose in the world. You must set those little beggars to torturing me." An involuntary shudder racked his emaciated frame. "Ugh, I can feel them yet, crawling, crawling."

"I suppose it's perfectly useless for me to try to explain. You won't believe me, anyhow; but I'm sorry, ever so sorry, about those mud-turtles. The twins were very naughty — they shall be punished, but they didn't realize, they're just kiddies —"

"Huh," he snorted, "it's enough to cost me my life, a man in my state. Fine mother you make," he went off on another tangent of fury. "What do you know about bringing up children?"

"Nothing," she answered, with unexpected humility, and her words came a bit brokenly. "It's been, oh, so hard. But," she raised her head and looked straight into eyes that were sharp as needle-points, "you're wrong, all wrong, Mr. Barton; Douglas did not leave you because of me. He wasn't happy —"

"He wasn't happy, and I'd like to know why not," interrupted the other, with fierce intensity. "A boy picked out of the gutter —"

She waited until his rage had expended itself in incoherent mutterings and threats. There was a brief conflict in Christine's mind; then either because she knew that her cause was already lost or realized with her native quickness of comprehension that here was a rare opportunity to plead for Douglas, she said boldly, "You didn't give Doug a chance. You were trying to make him a second Joshua Barton, and he never could be that. He's a born poet, and you can't make a money-grubber of a poet."

She waited, expecting a tornado of angry words. Instead there was utter quiet.

"Did you come to ask a favor for my nephew?" he demanded, after a moment, turning on her the full battery of his cold, hard, deep-sunken eyes.

She met his regard steadily. Suddenly there came to her a moment of vision. With the eye of sympathy she penetrated the layer upon layer of harshness, selfishness, misanthropy, until she reached the lonely, suffering heart of the man.

"No, Mr. Barton, but Douglas is one of my best friends, and, wherever he is, I wish him God-speed."

"Wherever he is," she heard, or fancied she heard, him repeat her words.

It was a full minute before either spoke. The old man sat, head bowed, staring into the copper-colored flames that were dancing on the hearth, and the girl waited she hardly knew for what.

The quiet entrance of Mark with the tea-tray broke the spell.

"Get out, you fool," the old man roared, raising a crutch threateningly. "Don't you know better than to disturb me when I'm occupied?"

Silently man and tray disappeared.

Mr. Barton's softened mood, if it had been a softened mood, had gone. His fingers were beating an impatient tattoo on the chair-arm as he turned upon his visitor with a harsh, "Well, out with it, young lady. What brought you here?"

His insolence set her face aflame, but she managed to answer calmly, "I want to rent Rain-on-the-Roof, I mean our house, your house, the house you've just bought, for one month. You see —"

"No," he bellowed, "no, not for one day. I said Saturday, and Saturday it is."

"My brother Laurie, the lame one," she persisted, as quietly as the fire of her wrath would let her, "was thrown almost under the street-car yesterday, and the doctor said he must not be moved for a month."

"H'm." He tapped the ends of his fleshless fingers together as he appeared to hesitate, then his jaws clamped and his face hardened until it was like stone. "Life's been one round of torture for me since you — you Trevors came, that fiddling, those little beggars. No, I said Saturday, and Saturday it is." With a peremptory wave of the hand he dismissed her.

The next day was Christine's twentieth birthday. The early morning mail brought her two letters from Cort which she promptly locked away with a growing collection of others in her desk-drawer. He was traveling about in the mountains, she knew, and that final letter of hers had not as yet reached him. Later in the morning a great florist's box was delivered to her, and presently twenty splendid yellow orchids were shedding an incense in the room. Cort had remembered her fancy for yellow orchids. An hour before noon she was busily packing books in the living-room when Amelia appeared with a small package.

Christine dropped to the floor with a tired sigh, and unwrapped the paper covering from a green satin box. Releasing the catch, she saw a magnificent large square-cut emerald outlined in diamonds attached to the merest thread of a platinum chain. Mechanically she read the enclosed card. "For the wife-to-be of Cortland Van Ness."

A grim little smile touched her lips as she repeated under her breath, "For the wife-to-be of Cortland Van Ness, yes, but not for Christine Trevor."

For a moment she gazed contemplatively at the lovely jewel. Once it would have thrilled her with delight. Now she found herself wondering its precise worth — several thousand dollars, she presumed. That would mean boots and socks and other things for the twins and a trip to the seashore for Laurie and — She brought herself up with a start, and thrusting the necklace into the case, closed it with a vicious snap and slipped the box into an apron pocket. It should presently be added to the desk-drawer collection.

Other gifts came during the day, a bunch of wild-flowers gathered and presented by two small persons with damp hair and grimy hands, but with eyes and lips brimful of love. A beautifully framed miniature of her father from Laurie brought quick tears to her eyes. Hardly had she wiped them away when again they overflowed at sight of Amelia's gift, a small knitted purse of silk, every stitch of which must have pained the old, knotted, rheumatic hands. Misery, too, came presently to lay her offering of a hand-embroidered towel at the shrine of her adored young mistress, and Freddy Blue had in some mysterious way learned the importance of the day, for Tommy trotted in about mid-afternoon with a loving note and a batch of famous "Blue" cookies.

But though the hours were crowded with the labor of packing, Christine was waiting with the eager impatience of her nature for another gift that had never yet failed to arrive on her birthday since she had begun on her teens. Docky always remembered her with a basket of white roses, and buried somewhere in the basket she was sure to find another smaller token, sometimes a tiny gold thimble, again a jeweled pencil, or a brooch or some one of the hundred trinkets that intrigue a young girl's fancy. She had never outgrown the ever-new enchantment of surprise. As the afternoon wore on, her eyes would wander to the clock on the mantel. It had never come as late as this. Surely he had not forgotten. But when she ran out into the garden to fill her young lungs with a breath of air, and saw that the white stars had already grown visible in the deep-blue night sky, her heart sank. He had forgotten. Well, she supposed she must learn the hard lesson; it was Freddy, not she, who —

A roadster swung up the carriage drive and Dr. Denton sprang out. She felt a wild thrill of joy. Impulsively she began to run toward him, then a shyness held her where she was. She would wait until he had passed into the house, then — But he spied her, slim and white as a nymph hovering close to a great bush of syringa which was filling the dusk with a heavy, palpitating sweetness.

She could not lift her eyes when he came toward her, and called her name. She could not lift her eyes when he caught both of her hands in one of his. What he was saying, she could not for the life of her have told. She only knew that every pulse was throbbing, throbbing, and her heart was singing to the music of his voice.

His laugh, which always sent thrills of happiness through her, suddenly rang out, and she came out of her daze to hear him say, "You're dreaming, Goldilocks. I believe I've made all my pretty speeches in vain. Well," he said, with a quick glance at his watch, "I haven't time to repeat them. I'm on my way to the hospital now. This has been a rushed day — enough work for two. I've been figuring around the last few hours how I could get out here. I fairly stole the time, as it is. I'll look in on Laurie, and when I come to-morrow, we can talk over the final arrangements to have him brought to my apartments until the fuss of moving is over."

Together they walked across the moon-white lawn, that is, in all probability, Dr. Denton walked, but Christine floated on threads of moonlight. Not until they were ascending the steps, her feet still light as Mercury's, did she see that he carried a basket of roses.

"A few posies for you, Princess Goldilocks," he said, when they were well within the living-room. And once more the thought struck him as she stood, eyes downcast, the light from the soft-shaded table-lamp striking golden lights from her red-gold hair that she was like a fresh-cut, fragrant flower.

Silently she held out her hands for the gift, but now she lifted her eyes to him. They were cloudily sweet, and her lips were smiling. "I'm so happy," she said in a breathless whisper, and her smile deepened at his answer, "I wish I were your fairy godmother to keep you always so."

The room was singularly quiet for a moment, while he looked at her as if he were trying to gauge her. Then, with a quickly suppressed sigh, he gravely imparted, "I thought long and hard, Goldilocks, before I decided on your birthday basket this year. You'll find a package that was entrusted to me long ago, to be given to you when you were a young lady. Unless I'm mistaken, you're grown up now."

Christine smiled up at him suddenly with an unlooked-for and alluring audacity. "I'm a real grown-up, Docky. I feel it in every bone." Then with one of her quick transitions from gaiety to soberness, she moved imperceptibly closer, and clasping his arm with both hands in a childishly appealing fashion, said, "So much has happened since you came back I haven't had time to tell you, and even now I know every minute of your time is precious, but I want you to know I'm going to earn a living for the family by dancing. Professor Armande thinks I can soon accept an engagement."

She waited for a storm of protest. It was not forthcoming, but after a moment, in which he looked down at her in a puzzled sort of way, he rejoined, "Cort'll have something to say on that subject, I fancy. Isn't he homeward bound now?"

Cort's name was magic to unlock her clasp. "I — I don't know," her lips trembled, and for a heart's beat she held out her ringless left hand to him.

There was in his eyes sympathy, understanding, tenderness, she hardly knew what. But whatever it was brought a quick blur of tears, and turning, she sped from the room.

CHAPTER XXII

A DIARY

The bedtime story had to be told to the twins and the last visit of the night paid to Laurie before Christine was free to give herself up to the delights of the "surprise" basket. Even then, she sat for a long time at the window, dreaming out into the midsummer dusk, while the roses offered her their incense unheeded.

Presently she roused herself, and snapping on the desk-lamp close beside her, in the rich golden light it shed over her and the surroundings, began to explore. Beneath the roses buried in a bed of moss she found a small, beaten silver jewel-box, with her initials beautifully engraved, and inside on its yellow satin bed lay Dr. Denton's card of birthday good wishes.

A shadow of disappointment passed over her face. Was that all? Why had Docky been so mysterious and what had he meant when he said, "You'll find a package that was entrusted to me long ago?" There must be something else.

At the very bottom of the basket she found it, a small package carefully wrapped and tied. It was addressed to "my darling daughter, Christine, to be given to her when she is old enough to understand."

With fingers that trembled, Christine threw off the wrappings. It was a diary written in her mother's hand. For a long, long time, the girl sat, head bowed, lost in memories of her beautiful and adored young mother.

The delicate chimes of a clock on the desk warned of the lateness of the hour. Reverently she touched the book. It fell open at the last entry. It was dated the day before the birth of the twins. She read,

"The thought has been strong upon me for the past few days that the sands of my life are running, running short. So I am trying to get my house in order. In setting my desk to rights this morning, I came upon my dear little old diary, and it, once the confidante of all my joys and sorrows, vividly has revived the past that I hoped was buried beneath the happiness the years have brought me.

"But to-night it all comes back, and I can not run away from it as in other times. Perhaps it will ease my heart to write it out. My husband, fond lover that he's been all these years, would never let me speak of it. He's always said we turned the lock on the past, and threw the key away. Perhaps I shall leave this confession for my little Christine. It may help her to know the mother she is soon to lose. The chance may be given to her to right my wrong. Who knows? Inexplicable are the ways of Providence."

A rush of tears blurred the letters. On the screen of her memory had flashed a picture. She could see it clearly in all its details, the nursery in the twilight hour with only the wavering flames from the grate-fire for light, and herself at the feet of her golden-haired mother. She could hear her mother in low-voiced musing, "It may be left for you to right a wrong of mine. But, no, child, you're too young to have your life shadowed with my burden. Perhaps —" She had stopped on half a word at the unexpected appearance of the master of the house.

"It all seems so long ago, I hardly know where to begin," the little diary went on, "but if it is to be made clear to Christine and keep her young soul clean of the taint of selfishness that has always been my sin, I must try to tell everything truthfully. There must be no concealment, hard as it is to tear open one's very own heart. But my husband must never see this. It would wound him deeply, and he might think I had regrets, and regrets I never have had, not for even a second. But he might not understand. So I shall give this into the keeping of our friend and physician, Dr. Denton, as a trust for my little girl.

"Perhaps it will be easier for me if I tell it to you, darling Christie, and so with your trustful eyes on my face, your hand in my hand, I shall make my confession.

"To-night my guilt weighs as heavily upon me as if I had killed some one, for I have done worse than rob a man of his life. I left him alive but without a heart, and with faith in mankind gone forever.

"You must know, my little Christie, that when barely a year older than you, I found myself utterly alone in the world, without a blood relative. My father was a mill-owner, and accounted a wealthy man. The last few years of his life — he outlived mother less than three years — we traveled everywhere to rebuild his health. Mother had been a beauty, and he worshipped me because I was her replica, so I grew up, spoiled, selfish, with not a thought for anyone else or anything else but my own immediate pleasure.

"On father's death, which happened very suddenly in a small Italian lake-town, my guardian came to take me home. I had never seen him before. He was a college friend of father's, a shy, silent, bookish man who led a singularly lonely life in spite of his great inherited wealth because of an accident in his boyhood which set him on crutches for the rest of his life. From the very first he was my abject slave. Father had, as I said before, overindulged me, but to my guardian I was all of life. He was as alone in the world as I. He had a brother, I remember vaguely now — he mentioned him once — but there had been some quarrel and they never came together again. He seemed to live only to gratify my desires almost before they were conceived. Surely no princess of royal blood had more lavish gifts showered upon her, and he sent far and wide for the best tutors. I had a small, rather sweet voice, and he spent a fortune to cultivate it. He was passionately fond of music, and could play the violin in a masterly fashion. He was always my accompanist and after all these years I can still see the light shining in his sunken eyes when I'd sing his favorite, 'Oh, that we two were Maying.'

"Money meant nothing to me, I had an unlimited spending account, and spent it like water in peacocking myself, and whatever whimsy of fashion I chose to dance after, my guardian admired me as if I had been a reigning beauty.

"The night of my eighteenth birthday he came out of his shell for my sake, and gave a splendid coming-out ball. I had just slipped away from the hands of my maid who had decked me out in a perfect fairy confection of lace and tulle for the great event, when he entered my dressing-room. I shall never forget his eyes when he saw me. They seemed fairly ablaze. Somehow I was frightened when he clasped on my throat a string of pink pearls that would have turned the head of even an older and more experienced woman.

"Suddenly he caught me by the shoulders and drew me close to him, and kissed me, then kissed me again and again, and again until I was limp and breathless. I never could remember afterwards how it came about, but when the guests arrived a great ruby was burning on my engagement finger, and I was presented to the world as my guardian's affianced wife.

"Of course, he could not dance, but I could feel those eyes of his watching, watching me, whenever a partner came to claim me for a dance, and I could feel them following me wherever I went.

"I remember as clearly as if it had happened yesterday that the clock was striking twelve when there was a stir among the guests, and everybody crowded toward the door to welcome a newcomer. I remember, too, I pouted and refused to break off an unusually pleasant waltz to meet the stranger, and even when my guardian insisted, as usual I had my way. It was not until I was in my proper setting, as I chose to think it, in the rose-bower my guardian had had set up for me at one end of the ballroom, that I deigned to meet him. When I looked into his eyes, I knew only one emotion — I was sorry I had delayed meeting him for five whole minutes. He was the young man who owned the house next door, closed since his father's death a year before, while he was globe-trotting. He had but just arrived home, he told me, and had hastened to pay his respects, late though they were, to his débutante neighbor."

"Why, he was father. How perfectly thrilling!" Christine cried out, in sudden amazement. "I'm beginning to understand. A thousand things are clear now. So that's why Joshua Barton —"

She was deep in the diary again.

"From that time on the rest of the evening slipped by like a dream. I only remember I cut all the dances to sit in the conservatory with him or wander through the gardens on his arm or dance together to the music in our hearts.

"For the first time I learned the blackness and fury of my guardian's temper. But I did not heed his ravings. I listened and smiled, for my heart was singing.

"And day by day the song in my heart grew sweeter and more exquisite, as day by day my next-door neighbor sought me out. We sang and played together, boated, drove, rode horseback, and danced the hours of night away in each other's arms.

"Then came the night when we confessed our love for each other, and we said we should die of our divine madness if we were kept apart. He wanted me to be married that night — we were at a house-party at his aunt's country home, and she openly favored our love. But over all these years the thought comes to comfort me I first gave back my troth to Joshua Barton before I became your father's wife.

"It was a bitter time I had with my guardian. Even yet his curses and threats of revenge ring in my ears. I can still see his face distorted with fury as he screamed, "You've lived on my bounty all these years. Your father died penniless. Sometime I'll get it back, penny upon penny, and interest too, for the heart's blood you've wrung from me."

"And he's kept his word," Christine caught her breath quiveringly. "But for him father might still be alive and St. Mark's fund — Laurie — the doll-house of a bungalow." She was too agitated from all she had read to think clearly. Her mind shuttled from one item to another. Another memory glinted in her tired brain, Joshua Barton as she had seen him that afternoon in her one moment of vision. "But, oh, mother, he's a poor lonely old man."

Her eyes were again on the little diary when the night's stillness was broken by the quick, sharp bark of a dog. Again it came, and again. Wrinkles! Christine sprang to her feet.

Amelia must have neglected to bed him as usual in the barn. She must get to him before he waked Laurie.

"Wrinkles," Christine whistled softly as she let herself out by the front door. "Wrinkles, this way, old boy," she called again, and sped over the lawn. He was racing like mad towards the Barton grounds and barking with all his small might. At the sound of her voice he darted back, leaped about her in circles, and still barking madly, ran ahead of her. What possessed the creature to run as if the fiends were after him? Was she dreaming, or was that a plume of smoke rising from the "Lonely House" tower? She stopped for an instant, and stared. It *was* smoke. Then a tongue of fire lifted itself and was gone. Her weary mind groped for a heart-beat, then she knew.

That tower was Joshua Barton's bedroom, and it was on fire.

Christine was always a good runner, but she beat her own record that night in reaching the Barton front-door. She rang three times, before there was any signs of life, then she heard some one stirring, and after a minute — to her it seemed an hour — Mark in bathrobe and slippers was inquiring sleepily what the disturbance was all about. He still moved mechanically as in the haze of a dream, even after her quick, excited explanation, so it was she who commanded the situation, and curiously enough, it was she who raced ahead up the stairs to the tower-room. She had no sense of strangeness. Instead she experienced a sudden vivid feeling that she had mounted those steps countless times before. Perhaps the lasting impression on her mother's brain had somehow descended to her. Perhaps she obeyed some impulse of her subconscious mind. Howbeit, unerringly she made her way to Joshua Barton's room, once her mother's boudoir, through the cloud of smoke that was already pouring out into the upper hallway. The memory of her mother hung so strangely over her that she had the sensation of being perfectly at home.

It was Christine who flung open the door, and beat her way, choking, strangled, blinded, into the smoke-filled room. It was Christine, too, who helped Mark who was beginning to assemble his scattered senses, half-carry, half-drag his unconscious master down the rear stairs — a burst of flames had already cut off the front staircase — and into the living-room.

"We can't stay here," panted Christine, as the crackling of the flames grew louder, and smoke began to seep in through the closed door. "The whole house is afire. We must get him out."

"But where?" Mark wrung his hands helplessly. "I'm here alone. Mr. Barton discharged the three Mexican servants to-day, and —"

"You're not alone. I'm here. We'll carry him over to my house, and then you turn in the alarm."

"Your house, Miss."

Amazement paralyzed him for a moment, then together they managed to carry the dead weight of Joshua Barton across what seemed, at least to Christine's tight nerves and straining muscles, an unending stretch of lawn, and into what had been John Trevor's boyhood home. On her own bed they laid him, still unmindful of where he was or what was going on.

"I'll get 'Melia to look after him. You turn in the alarm while I'll hot-foot it for his doctor — it's Dr. Marsh, isn't it, that I've seen coming to your house? Our phone's been out of order since yesterday. Now don't waste time arguing. You can do more good here than I. You see, I'll be back before you know I'm gone."

Christine's tone was as cool and matter-of-fact as if it were a mere commonplace for her to be going for a doctor for Joshua Barton in the dead of night through several deserted streets.

The hall-clock had pealed three times, when at last she threw her weary self on a bed which Misery had improvised for her in the nursery.

"I'm afraid you'll have a longer visit from Joshua Barton than you're reckoning on." Dr. Marsh's parting words repeated themselves over and over in her tired brain in her last moments of consciousness.

"Both he and his home are a wreck. You've taken upon yourself a hard task, young lady. I'm sorry for you."

During the subsequent days Christine found she had undertaken a hard task, one that sometimes strained to the breaking-point nerves, strength, patience, but she never felt sorry for herself. It was a task of love she had undertaken. She was trying to make reparation for her mother's old-time broken promise.

Though only Mark was allowed in the sick-room, Christine devised many unobtrusive ways and means of contributing to the patient's comfort, and in her heart rejoiced at each opportunity to serve him. One morning she was preparing his breakfast tray with their finest egg-shell china and old silver when Mark appeared in the doorway.

"I'm a bit late this morning," she apologized. "He isn't any worse?" she asked, looking up in sudden alarm at Mark's unusual silence.

He shook his head. "Better, I should say. First time he's sworn at me. But — but something's up. He wants to see you right away. If he gets nasty —"

"Don't look so worried. He isn't going to bite my head off. He probably wants to tell us our room's worth our company. To-morrow's moving day for us, you know. I'll come when he's finished breakfast."

Joshua Barton had breakfasted, and with appetite, from the appearance of the tray when Christine tapped and slipped into the room.

Propped high among the pillows, he looked thinner, more forbidding than ever. His face, always pale, had a strange clay-like color, and his deep-sunken eyes were cold and hard like gray stone, but there was that in the trembling lips and chin, in the working of the thin fingers, in the air of helplessness, that tugged appealingly at her heart-strings.

"Good morning," she said, and on a sudden impulse held out both her hands.

He stared, the picture of amazement, but made no move to take her hands. She felt as if icy water had been dashed into her face. There was a moment of quiet in which a clock on her dressing-table ticked.

"You sent for me," she said at last.

Still he studied her face without speaking, then — "Why did you do it?" The words seemed to fall from his lips without his own volition.

"Do what?" she parried, having arrived at one of her characteristically swift decisions that serenity would be her best card. Regardless of provocation, she would keep unruffled. She would bear in mind that last entry in her mother's diary.

"Save my life, get the doctor in the middle of the night, turn yourself out of here for me"— he set her head spinning with his cyclonic rejoinder. "Now don't say it was nothing," he blazed at her suddenly, as she opened her lips to speak. "No mock-modesty with me. My life may mean nothing to you, but strange to say, it has still some worth to me, and the doctor tells me a quarter of an hour more in that smoke —" He finished with an expressive gesture.

Christine pondered the situation for a moment. With a sudden inrush of perception, she understood that much depended on this interview and she realized, too, that her answer to his question was the crux of the whole interview. With nice deliberation she told the truth. "I didn't stop to think. I just did what I did. I'd have done it for anyone."

"Humph," he moved his head uneasily — "not especially flattering. You'd have done it for anyone. Well, perhaps that's not the point at issue. Why did you do it? You saved my life, and that after yesterday."

"Mark would probably have waked up, and —"

"Not he, that blockhead," he interrupted rudely — "sleeps like a log at all times, and I've a private belief — Marsh doesn't hold with me, though — that those Mexicans fixed up his coffee so the fire could make headway before he'd come to and realize what was happening. Pretty little scheme of revenge. Almost cost my life. And now, young lady," he shot his question at her with an insolence that made her flame with quick anger, "what are your terms?"

"Terms? I haven't any."

"Terms, reward, whatever you choose to call it," he returned, impatiently. "You saved my life, as I've told you for the third or fourth time, and it isn't like Joshua Barton to owe any human for anything. Name your price."

Christine remained silent. Her thoughts were all with the enshrined image of her mother. For her dear sake she must contain herself, and control her burning resentment. She continued to regard him through lowered lashes while she fought for self-control.

Her absorption irritated him.

"Come, come, don't hesitate. Make your price high as you like."

Hot words rushed to her lips, but with a mighty effort she held them back.

"I never thought of a reward," she insisted, "I'd have done it for anyone. But, yes, there is something I want in return."

"Out with it!" He made a gesture of impatience as she paused, her eyes narrowed in thoughtfulness.

"Your friendship," she said, and there was a queer little break in her voice like laughter and tears blended.

For once words would not come to Joshua Barton. He could only stare in dumbfounded silence.

"This — this," she groped an instant, then went on quickly, "this feud has lasted long enough, don't you think? I do, and I want to do everything that's in my power to make up —"

"What's this? Some new trick?" was suddenly snarled at her. Joshua Barton had recovered himself. "My friendship? I haven't such a thing. There is no such thing as friendship. It's all self, self, self, in this world. Come, what is it you want under the pretext of friendship? Another month here — ?"

It was Christine who interrupted this time.

"We move to-morrow, Mr. Barton." She stopped and her lip quivered. Then she went on quietly, "I never understood until last night why you hated us. I do now. Mother wrote it out for me in her diary, and oh, she was sorry — so sorry, for you."

Her words again seemed to transfix him. He raised bruised, deep-sunken eyes that told so plainly of his suffering, but did not speak. He seemed to be appraising her. Steadily she met his regard. At last he said, and there was a subdued passion in his voice, "Will you say that again?"

Tremulously Christine repeated, "She was, oh, so sorry for you." After a moment of silence she added, "She hoped I could in some way make it up to you. And, please, won't you let me try?"

For another long, endless moment he fastened his burning gaze upon her. It was as if he were trying to plumb her very soul. Quietly she bore the fire of his scrutiny.

"You mean it. But it's — it's incredible."

Her cheeks were aglow and her eyes shimmered with quick, high excitement.

"Oh, no, it isn't. Don't you see, mother always felt she had wronged you, because she broke her word to you. Of course, she couldn't help it — father was so perfectly wonderful — but, anyhow, she passed it on to me to be good to you and all that."

The sadness that is bred in loneliness suddenly came upon him as he said, half aloud, "After all these years."

Acutely attentive to every tone of his voice, Christine was quick to comprehend the softened mood, and equally quick to press home the advantage. "It's a pretty big debt after all these years, but Laurie and the twins can help, too."

"Perhaps it would be as well not to include the twins in the bargain," retorted Joshua Barton with grim humor. "I rather fancy I'd not enjoy their efforts."

"But it is a bargain," Christine persisted and exhaled in an abandon of relief, "and you'll let Laurie do his part?"

"Some people might say he'd already done his part," was the enigmatical reply.

She looked at him quickly, her eyes widening with surprise. "What —" She checked herself suddenly, then harked back to her topic. "Shall we shake hands on the bargain?"

"It's time for my nap," he snapped at her, with a quick return of his old impatience. "Send that blockhead Mark in at once."

She had already closed the door behind her when he called her back.

"I can't stir for a month, Marsh says. Don't move till I tell you to."

"But we're all ready —"

"I'm not," he thundered at her; "would you turn me out in the street?"

"No, but —"

"But what?"

"You told us to be out of your house by Saturday."

"Humph! Well, now I tell you to stay in *your* house as long as you like."

CHAPTER XXIII

ST. MARK'S FUND

All that day and the next there was a battle royal between Trevor pride and Barton will, and in the end Trevor pride lost, or, at least, was forced to beat a retreat. Everyone in Christine's small world — Dr. Denton, Dr. Marsh, Laurie, Amelia — was speedily ranged on Joshua Barton's side. To move was out of the question for him in his present state, and for Laurie, too, the upheaval would be anything but beneficial.

"But we're all ready to move; besides, we've paid a month's rent," Christine advanced as a last argument to Dr. Denton.

He laughed, a delightful, boyish laugh. "Amelia and Misery'll enjoy nothing so much in the world as to put things in order again. And I rather fancy those lovers Graves was telling me about — that office man and his fiancée who were so desperately in love with that bungalow — would rather enjoy occupying it until —" He paused significantly.

"Until," repeated Christine, who couldn't resist the last word, "Joshua Barton's better and we can live for ourselves."

But days and weeks slipped by, and Joshua Barton was no better. At least, he declared he was not. Dr. Marsh did not agree with him, and Mark openly voiced his opinion on that subject several times to Amelia.

"Heaven bless you," he burst out, coming into the living-room late one morning, "but he's possessed to-day. Third time I've fixed his lunch-tray, and it don't suit yet. I know what he wants."

Amelia glanced up from her never-ending task of darning small socks. Her shrewd old eyes were twinkling behind her spectacles. "So do I. But she isn't here. She's havin' her dancing-lesson this mornin' 'stead of this afternoon."

"Queer thing," mused the man, "how different he is when she comes in the room. He just eats her up with his eyes, and no matter how he roars at her and fights with her, she only laughs. She sure knows how to take him. He's a changed man, I'm telling you, Mrs. Amelia, not but what he's got a long way to go yet before he's made over into pure angel, him with that temper and that tongue." Mark paused. He was not given to long speeches, but this morning he apparently needed to unburden himself.

After a moment he went on, "And it's my private opinion, Mrs. Amelia"— he glanced cautiously about and discreetly lowered his voice —"it's my private opinion, for your ear alone, Mrs. Amelia, he's never going to get well enough to be moved from here."

Oddly enough, Amelia did not seem in the least disconcerted by this piece of news. "He ain't in my way, I'm sure, and his board-money pays the rent Christine was bound we owed him and leaves somethin' over." The old woman rocked contentedly, as she rolled up the mended socks and stowed the ball away in her basket.

"Miss Christine's a proud 'un, all right. I was in the next room and couldn't help overhearing her say, 'You can't give me this house. We're going to pay you rent as long as we live here,' and the old man chuckled-like — think of him chuckling — and said, 'Well, Missie, you won't object to my paying my way,' and of course she couldn't object. I tell you, Mrs. Amelia, it beats the Dutch the way that slip of a girl has made friends with him."

The rocking suddenly stopped. "You appear to think it's Miss Christine who's worked the change. She's done wonders. Give credit, where credit's due, says I, but I'm rather thinkin' my boy's had a hand in it, too. Did you ever see a more contented pair than that old man and my Laurie when they're together?"

"It's queer, it's more than passing queer," admitted Mark, "how he's taken to that boy when the very sight of him used to send him into a fit of rage, and when he played that fiddle —" His hands went out in an expressive gesture. "Anyhow," he wound up with the air of one who has reached an unalterable decision, "Joshua Barton's a different man, and our Miss Christine's had a hand in it. Mr. Douglas wouldn't know him now."

"Doug wouldn't know him now." A voice in the back of Christine's mind reiterated Mark's words one August afternoon. She was standing in the doorway of what had been her bedroom until the night of the fire. Mr. Barton was in bed, but in a sitting position. His face was still haggard and drawn as from pain, but his eyes held a softer light and his lips were no longer hard and grim. They had begun to learn the trick of smiling. Eyes and lips were dreamily smiling now at the boy who in a chair drawn close to the bedside was playing an exquisite barcarolle.

The girl in the doorway, unheard, unseen, scarcely breathed lest she should break the spell. She wished she could paint that picture, the old man in the rapt, listening attitude, the boyish player with the illumined face which still showed an undercurrent of melancholy, the room a pool of sunlight, and filled with the drowsy, sweet scent of late roses a-blow. A sudden pain gripped her and a lump knotted her throat. If only her mother could be with her now to see with her very own eyes —

"That was the barcarolle father always loved," Laurie's voice broke the stillness that followed the last note. "I believe I worked harder on that than on anything else in my life. Don't you remember I was telling you about how discouraged I felt? I guess it was in the very first letter." The boy gave the old man a sudden, brilliant smile that lit up the somber eyes and mournful young face.

"Remember! I haven't forgotten a word. It came as rather a surprise, you know, your offer to adopt me because Wrinkles was gone and I must be rather lonely." The harsh voice rumbled on, but Christine heard no more, at least for a few moments. She was busily thinking. The first letter Laurie had written him. Her thoughts raced after this new scent. Suddenly several small incidents spread over the last few weeks linked themselves together and in a flash of comprehension she knew. Laurie had posted a daily letter brimming over with friendly message for his lonely next-door neighbor.

"This is that Chopin valse I was trying to remember yesterday," she heard Laurie say, as again he tucked his bow under his chin, and now a glorious harmony was flooding the air. When the last faint tremor of sound was gone, Mr. Barton suddenly snapped out, "No more to-day. You've tired me all out."

Laurie smiled. His fine senses had long ago gauged the man, and he knew that a display of temper was his safety-valve for emotion. So lovingly he encased his violin, and quietly remarked, "It's time for your nap, Uncle Barty. I'll send Mark to you."

"Why doesn't he come of himself? He's neglecting me shamefully these days. I'll fire him yet, if he isn't mighty careful."

Again Laurie smiled and the eavesdropper smiled, too. Already this was a familiar threat, and Mark in his many years of service had learned to appreciate it for what it was worth.

Laurie was reaching for his crutches, and Christine had taken a step or two into the room to come to his assistance when a remark of Mr. Barton's made her withdraw hastily. "Just as well not to let Christine know of those letters, Laurie. It's a secret between us men, you understand. She — she might hold it up against me for trying to make you move after you'd gone and adopted me; and I don't know as I'd blame her if she did. It's kind of hard, though, teaching an old dog new tricks."

"Douglas would have the surprise of his young life if he could hear his uncle now with his very own ears," went through Christine's mind as she slipped into the nursery. "Believe me, if I knew his whereabouts he'd hear from me *muy pronto.*"

A moment later, emerging casually from the nursery, she came upon Laurie just outside Mr. Barton's door, with a well-feigned expression of surprise.

"You here? Isn't he napping?" she looked questioningly at her brother with a nod in the direction of the closed door. "I thought —"

But what she thought was never expressed in words, for holding himself suspended on his crutches, Laurie had fished a letter out of his pocket. "It's from Doug. He wrote me a bully note, too." Enthusiasm suddenly kindled his sensitive features. "Say, Chris, but he's made a whopper of a mistake about his uncle. He may be sort of prickly and — and — rough on the outside, but he's a winner on the inside, just the same."

"Yes," she said, absent-mindedly. She was leaning against the wall, her eyes fairly leaping over the closely written pages.

"We never got so — so well acquainted as this morning," the boy went on eagerly, too absorbed in his own story to notice his sister's lack of attention, "and somehow, I honestly don't know how it came about, but there I was telling him all about father and St. Mark's fund and —"

"Eh? What?" demanded Christine suddenly, giving him a startled look. Now she wondered if her policy of reticence had been wise. She had told Laurie very little of their mother's story beyond the fact that Joshua Barton had once been her guardian, and she had seriously displeased him before her marriage. "Did he — was he — what did he say?" She was rather white about the lips.

"He didn't say much at first. I thought he hadn't been listening. His eyes looked so — so sort of faraway. Then he said from all he'd heard it hadn't been father's fault at all — just a stroke of bad luck that often happens to the best of men, and that a miserly old fellow was to blame. He didn't tell who he was, and of course I didn't ask him — but," Laurie's eyes flashed fire and his hands clenched on his crutches, "but I'd beat him up if I knew."

"Yes, yes, go on!" she cried tensely.

"There isn't anything else to tell except that when father saw the smash was coming, he went to this — this old miser, and begged for a loan — just a few days would have been enough, but he — he wouldn't." Laurie's voice broke in spite of himself, and he made for his own room.

Christine stared with unseeing eyes at the closed door. Her heart ached for the boy's suffering, while a fierce resentment flamed up again toward the man who had caused him this anguish. Wretched old miser! If she could only hurt him half as hard —

A thought came quick and sharp. Joshua Barton had scourged himself. It must have been torture to his proud spirit to make that confession, covert though it was, to Laurie. It must have gone hard with him, thus to abase himself, even though Laurie didn't understand. The resentment was gone. A quiver caught her lips. He was a lonely, pain-stricken old man and she would tell Douglas Barton so. He was young, with the whole world before him. His immediate duty was to look after his uncle, who had only him to depend upon for comfort and cheer.

And that, with an airy unconcern for any advice to the contrary that she had given the young man before, was the burden of the letter she wrote that afternoon.

"It's perfectly fine, Doug," was her concluding paragraph, "to think you're having such wonderful success. Be sure to let me see every line of your poems that magazine prints, but as I've said before, you can write just as well here in Merrivale, and, besides, your uncle needs you. We've adopted him as our Uncle Barty, and it would do your heart good to hear him and Laurie quarrel over the way a barcarolle or a minuet is to be played on the violin — oh, he's a different, different man, Doug, that is, most of the time. He still has tantrums when the twins drop in uninvited for a visit, but most times he's a perfect old dear. Now write or, better yet, telegraph when you'll come, and I'll be down at the depot in my aeroplane to meet you."

The gold of the afternoon was already fading when Christine went zigzagging across the lawn after posting her letter to Douglas. Suddenly the late afternoon stillness was broken by a loud "Hey, there, mister," and the sound of running feet.

Christine whirled about and saw Mark, his arms filled with parcels which his master had sent him to the city to purchase, halted by a boy in messenger's uniform. Instantly the light of recognition appeared in her eyes. The messenger was he of the snub-nose and freckled face. They stood, man and boy, not ten feet from where she was, and though she made a step or two in the direction of the house, curiosity got the better of her, and for the second time that day she played the part of eavesdropper. The conversation was brief, but to Christine, at least, it was eminently illuminating. It gave her a key to the mystery that she had failed to puzzle out.

"Ain't seen ye lately at the office, mister."

"No."

"No more presents for that lame Trevor boy, mister?"

"No, he's better again. Besides, Mr. Barton's living here now himself."

"Sort of miss the fun, mister, and — the extra kale. Oh, thanks, mister, that wasn't no hint, but say, it'll come in mighty handy just the same. 'Night, mister."

Christine stood behind a great tasseled pine until the front door had closed over Mark. Out of the fullness of the moment she smiled radiantly to herself.

So it was Joshua Barton who had played the part of fairy godmother to Laurie. Would wonders never cease? Those letters of Laurie's must have started the thawing process. And, now, the warm sunshine of the Trevor friendship was gradually melting all the long accumulated snow and ice. Who knew but some day Joshua Barton would have a real, honest-to-goodness heart?

Then her vivid young fancy painted a pleasant picture of reconciliation between Joshua Barton and his nephew, and she wouldn't have been Christine Trevor if she hadn't sketched herself in as the central figure smiling benignly on both men whose hands she had just brought together in a vital clasp.

But with one quick stroke her sense of humor erased the pleasant picture, and she laughed aloud. "Same old center of the universe, aren't you? Well, anyhow, it's a pretty fine universe, after all."

A sudden ecstasy thrilled the girl at the quiet beauty of the drowsy old garden in the calm of twilight, and made her heart leap up. The sunset glow was slowly fading and all bird song was hushed. She caught her first glimpse of the moon, newborn and exquisitely curved, poised over the tip of a tall pine. Then her eyes moved to an elm tree of lovely shape, with its cloudy boughs lifted to the unbroken blue of the sky. Her response to the thrill at her heart was instant and uncontrollable. She went off into a dance of delight, and her feet interpreted the thoughts that rose within her of music and gladness and the intoxicating joy of being alive.

When she stopped, the thrill at her heart had deepened, until tears wet her cheeks. It was as if the beauty of the outdoor world had suddenly stabbed her wide awake, and she saw into the still fastness of her spirit. An aching emotion overpowered her. In a clarified moment she knew that she was winning happiness not in self-seeking nor in a mad pursuit of pleasure, but in the full breath of unselfishness, in an outpouring of self for others.

For the next day or two Christine was unreasonably consumed with impatience. To be sure, Douglas couldn't possibly have reached Merrivale in that brief interval of time, but he could have wired the time of arrival. Every peal of the door-bell sent her heart a-flutter and her feet flying to meet a telegraph messenger. Then two or three more days lagged by, and still no word from the absent nephew. Perhaps he was out of town and her letter was still unread. Some editor friend might have invited him for a week-end, you know. A genius like Douglas would surely be besieged with invitations from editors anxious to contract for his whole output.

Well, any moment now, she might expect a wire or at least a special letter or, better still, the young man in person.

Her thoughts had reverted to this eagerly-anticipated return of the wanderer late one afternoon when she swung herself lithely off the suburban car. Somehow, Douglas had been uppermost in her mind throughout her dancing-lesson, and during the tedious trolley ride she had allowed him so to occupy her thoughts that she was fully convinced his boyish, undersized figure would spring out at her from behind some tree or bush on the Trevor grounds, or would be lurking back of a veranda pillar to pounce upon her with an air-ripping shout.

A small undersized figure did rise from a chair in the far corner of the veranda, and move toward her as she sped up the steps. But the figure advanced, not with boyish energy and elasticity, but with the measured tread of age.

"I phoned in early this afternoon, Miss Christine," Mr. Graves' slow monotone, not Douglas' eager stammer, greeted her, "and Amelia informed me you'd be home for dinner, so I dropped in after office hours. I've a bit of pleasant news for you." He made that familiar dry, crackling sound with his hands. "It's pleasant to be the bearer of good news, Miss Christine," he said, directing towards her his slow smile.

Though fired with impatience, she said nothing. She knew Mr. Graves of old. He was slow-moving, deliberate, a detail man. Nothing could hurry him.

"It all came about in a most mysterious fashion," he said, after an impressive moment of silence, "and I am at liberty to reveal only a part of the facts to you." Again he paused, and this time the silence endured so long that Christine longed to shake the little man into speech. At the precise instant that she had reached the decision that she should scream if the silence was maintained another heart-beat, he spoke,

"Arrangements were made this morning for reestablishing St. Mark's fund on a solid financial basis and —"

"How perfectly wonderful! You old dear!" Mr. Graves received the shock of his life. Christine threw her arms about him, and kissed him tempestuously. What mattered it that her kiss fell on the end of his nose? Suffice it that Christine had kissed him, and it took several moments for him to recover sufficiently from that breath-taking fact to continue,

"As I was saying, it is to be known hereafter as the Laurence Trevor fund and to be maintained —"

Here he proceeded to explain minutely various business details that would ensure the permanence of the fund through succeeding generations, but Christine was not listening, there was so much crowding in on her at once to be thought out.

When he had at last come to an end, "Yes," she said, in that level tone that denotes a preoccupied mind, and for a full half minute smiled unseeingly at him with her eyes very big and dark and soft just then.

George Graves went to his last rest with the secret buried in his heart that his beloved Miss Christine's mind had been completely unbalanced, for the moment at least, by the good news he bore her that day, for otherwise how could one explain her queer smile and unintelligible words: "The old boy's got a real, honest-to-goodness heart, after all."

CHAPTER XXIV

THE GEORGE POTTSES' GARDEN FÊTE

Early one morning towards the end of August, when already a brooding oppression of heat lay upon the city like a mantle, Christine, cool and sweet in white from her pumps to her wide hat with the floppy brim, was making her way through the blazing, crowded city streets. Despite the heat of the past weeks she had not missed a single dancing-lesson. The Professor had assured her that with early fall there would be an opening for her with an old-time manager-friend of his if she were ready, and Christine had figuratively set her teeth in a grim resolve to be ready.

On some inexplicable impulse she had gone two squares out of her way this hot morning to pass the Tremont Club, and was now moving slowly past, her eyes on the façade, and her mind busy with recollections of former merry times lived within the exclusive walls.

An opulent gray limousine swept round the corner, slackened speed, and slanted to the curb. The gray-clad chauffeur cast open the door. There emerged a stoutish, over-elaborately gowned person all in baby-blue. While Christine, a gleam of recognition in her eye, was casting about for some avenue of escape Mrs. George Potts bore down upon her with a fashionable, high-heeled teeter.

"Oh, it's you, Christine. You keep yourself such a stranger these days I didn't recognize you," She held out her hands effusively, her large face wreathed in dimpling smiles. "Beastly bore, isn't it, havin' that drive blocked up, and makin' us poor women walk all that way up to the club this hot day? 'What's the big idea?' I says to George this mornin' over our coffee cups. 'You women 've worn out the asphalt scorchin' so often to the club for your mornin' bridge, and it's got to be done over, that's the big idea.' 'Well, then, let 'em choose cooler weather or let 'em do it at night,' says I. Late, aren't we?"

"I don't know," Christine's voice was sweet but indescribably remote. "I'm not going to the club."

"Of course, my dear. I forgot you're still not goin' out, but my head's so full of things these days it's no wonder I forget. You see, we're just finishin' up our Roman, no, Greek, gardens, and we're celebratin' with a perfectly huge garden party, and what do you think?" In her exuberance Mrs. Potts seized Christine by the wrists and held the unwilling captive in a moist grip while she babbled on, "I'm so excited I can't keep from tellin' it to somebody, and of course it's perfectly safe with you." With a glance over her shoulder to make sure she would not be overheard, "I had a note acceptin' this morning. You'll never guess who from? Carlina, and this time"— she gave Christine a playful nudge with her elbow —"she isn't goin' to back out. Believe me, I've made it worth her while to show up, but I'm not tellin' anybody yet; I'm kind of superstitious, you see — sort of afraid it'll queer the whole thing if I brag, so George says, 'Why not keep the whole shootin'-match a dead secret from the bunch,' and that's what I'm goin' to do. Ta-ta, dear.

Oh, I say, I do wish you'd come. It's high time you were goin' out again and the crowd'll all give you the glad hand."

Christine's hands came together in a pretty eagerness. "I'd love to see Carlina dance — but no, thank you, it isn't possible. I — I can't come."

That was Monday. Saturday morning to Christine's surprise Carlina crept softly in during her dancing-lesson, and with an imperious wave of the hand motioned the girl not to break off. Christine could feel she was regarding her intently through her lowered eyelashes, though she seated herself at once in a far corner of the room and to all appearances was soon lost in a book.

When the last tremor of sound had died away under the Professor's fingers and Christine's feet were still, Carlina lifted her lithe, long, elusively charming body from the depths of the chair, and came towards the girl.

"You have learned much, *ma chérie,*" she said, with her pretty foreign intonation, "here." Her hand fluttered toward her heart. "It has made you dance — oh — so — so not like the last time," she added, with a hint of impatience because the right words would not come. "Then you danced like a young girl, light, gay, but no — no feeling. Now you have it, more color, depth — the true art."

She crossed with a graceful step to her father's side, and for a few moments the two engaged in a low-voiced conversation in their native tongue. Then Carlina moved again to Christine, who was standing at the window, looking out into the dusty street blazing in the morning sun.

"*Ma chérie.*" Christine turned about. A tender expression had swept into the white mobile face. "You did much for me." Her fingers fluttered involuntarily to the brooch at her throat. "I can never thank you, but I can do a little, little something for you. I had it in my mind when I said yes to that — Mrs. Potts." Her shoulders shrugged expressively over the name. "She offered me — pouf, much money, as if I dance for that for her and her kind. But, no, I said to myself, I shall accept, I shall dance once, and the other two times it shall be my little friend, Christine Trevor. This shall be her one big chance, and with me shall come Pavley, that great impressario."

"Madame," Christine's voice was a sob of jubilation. "You can't mean it. I — I dance with you! Oh, I can never, never do it."

"Instead of me," corrected the other sweetly. "And you will dance the hearts out of those people there."

"But"— a sudden thought careered wildly through Christine's mind —"Mrs. Potts will never allow me —"

Carlina laughed in airiest scorn. "She shall not know — only what I tell her. She will be so delighted to have Carlina she will let her come under any conditions, and to-morrow when I'm back again in New York I shall write her my doctor lets me dance but once that night, but I bring with me a young dancer who will one day set the world on fire, who will some day, who knows, take — Carlina's place."

And while Christine's blood was still racing to this new, bewildering thought, she slipped from the room.

During the following days, though the mercury continued to climb, Christine gave every minute of her time and every atom of her strength and enthusiasm that the Professor would permit to the business of preparing for her first engagement. She must not disappoint Carlina — she must not disappoint herself.

Naturally enough there were times when bitter doubts assailed her as to her success, but her temperament was far too mercurial to allow her to remain long in the depths. The very thought of her first appearance was enough to send the blood singing through her veins and to make her heart leap tumultuously.

There were times, too, when she felt she should burst if she didn't divulge her secret to some one. But the Professor and Carlina had decided it would enhance the value of her début tenfold if it were veiled in mystery. Once, however, it happened that she yielded to temptation, and confided in her guardian. He had come upon her unawares practising in the twilight in the living-room. For a long moment he stood in the doorway. As he followed her light graceful movements he suddenly recalled an exquisite dancing figure on a Tanagra vase on his living-room mantel. Involuntarily he sighed. How young she was! How like a flaming torch of thrilling life and joy! His experienced eye noted that she was gowned in a diaphanous confection of silver-green like the leaves of a young poplar in spring, and above the green her cheeks were deeply pink and above the pink were the gold-brown of her eyes and the shimmering gold of her hair.

Her dance ended before a mirror. "You're perfectly wooden, to-day," she frowned to her image.

"You'll — oh, Docky, how — how you startled me! I thought I was alone — I thought you were miles away," she stammered in panicky astonishment, and blushed like a child caught red-handed in mischief.

"I was out this way," he took her extended hands with his engaging smile, "and thought I'd pay Laurie a little visit. I found the door open and was bold enough to walk in, and my boldness was rewarded by a glimpse of a — dress rehearsal, I surmise."

Their eyes met and they laughed together. Then the truth came pell-mell from her lips. "It's my first real dress rehearsal, Docky. The gown was delivered ten jiffs ago and I simply couldn't resist — oh —" she broke off and her color grew high.

"It's too late to stop now, Goldilocks. Out with the rest of it."

"I'm not supposed to tell. It's a deep, dar-r-r-k secret. I'm a dancer with a wonderful future ahead of me — so far it's 'way, 'way in the dim future — that Carlina's bringing for the Pottses' garden fête." She threw back her shoulders, clasping her hands, and unconsciously took on an attitude of defiance.

A minute came and passed before he spoke, and then it was more to himself than her. "So it's come. I wish I could have prevented it —" He crossed the room and stood at the window, gazing out intently at the flower-beds below. Then he strode back to her side again. "When is it to be?"

"Next Tuesday."

"And I'm due in New York that night."

"Oh, Docky, it would keep me from being so panicky if I knew you — I mean if you and my friends were there. It'll be heaps worse dancing before people who know you and who'll sit there goggle-eyed to — but I'm not going even to think about that. Tell me, don't you like me in my sitty-out skirts?"

Slowly, with alluring grace, she pirouetted before him on silver-clad toes. For a moment he regarded her gravely, then he smiled at her unexpectedly, and as always his smile made her quiver with the beating of a hundred unexpected pulses.

"You're worth coming miles to see, Goldilocks. I'll be there if I have to stay up every night for a week to finish up. But," he said, moving a bit closer, and scrutinizing her with his trained eye, "remember, you're not to tire yourself out rehearsing and —"

"Bunk," she interrupted, inelegantly. "In my bright young lexicon there's no such word as tired."

But the strain of the last few days before the garden fête was beginning to tell on her and she was looking pale and thin one morning when she dropped into a shoe-shop, intent upon her Sisyphus-like task of keeping the Trevor twin toes in shoes, and tilted into Mrs. Potts.

"You're down on your looks a bit, my dear," commented that lady vivaciously. "It's this beastly heat, no doubt. Well, I'm not feeling extra fit myself, and I says to George last night before the Country Club dinner, 'Wild horses couldn't keep me in town another minute after that garden fête.' No, pink satin" — this to the patient shoe-clerk who was applying his handkerchief to his heated forehead, "about three shades lighter and the heels ought to be several inches higher. A last purchase, my dear, for my niece who's unexpectedly passing through the city and of course she'll stay over for the party. The poor dear's from the country — tied down to an invalid mother — no clothes fit to speak of — so I'm getting her all kinds of do-dads. You got your card, of course," beamed Mrs. Potts, in the interval of the clerk's search for a more nearly rose-tinted pair of slippers. "Do come, that's a dear."

Christine could only trust herself to smile.

"It's going to be some show, George says, and," Mrs. Potts lowered her voice to a half whisper, "now everything's set I don't mind telling you — I always did have a soft spot in my heart for you, Christine — there's going to be a sensation that night."

Christine flashed her a startled glance.

But Mrs. Potts continued exultantly, "Not one star dancer, but two. A perfectly new wonder — first appearance — greater than Carlina herself, I'm told. Yes, that pair'll do. Have them sent at once." And while Mrs. Potts was giving her undivided attention to the patient young man, Christine resisting a wild desire to shriek out the truth, fled incontinently without making her purchases.

Afterwards she often wondered how she lived through that last day of the much advertised event. For weeks now the society sheets and newspapers had devoted important space to a full description of every detail of the Potts estate from the "beautiful little Greek theatre set like a gem in its exquisite environs," to the fountain presided over by a bronze Pan. Over the pages of the Sunday supplement had been spread views of the new Potts gardens, formal and sunken, with huge photographs of the master and mistress thereof together with a three-column account of the spectacular garden fête which was to be the theatre's formal opening to the Potts' friends. But Mrs. Potts had been true to her word, at least as far as newspaper reports had gone. There had been only vaguest hints, mysterious suggestions as to the form of the entertainment, and only that very morning the early edition had given another two columns of front-page space to an account of the final preparations for the great event, with the concluding statement that no details of the nature of the entertainment that was in store for the fortunate guests had been presented for publication. It was safe to assume, however, that in a programme composed of only world-famed artists, Carlina, the great *danseuse,* would top the list.

What would the reporters say, she wondered, if they knew that she, Christine Trevor, would be one of that number of "world-famed artists"? She was to dance twice in Carlina's stead. The very thought made her cheeks and lips chalk-pale and set her to moving restlessly about the room.

"You're nervous as a witch this afternoon," complained Mr. Barton, when Christine was making one of her restless pilgrimages up and down his room. "You're pale as a ghost, too," he added with concern. "I wish you'd behave yourself, Christine," he snarled at her in quick anger, "and not work yourself to the bone with that ridiculous notion of supporting your family. Why in Sam Hill can't you be sensible and let me — ?"

She stopped her fidgeting about to press gentle fingers over his lips. "I've let you already, Uncle Barty. You know perfectly well, you old dear, I never could have bought those dancing frocks for to-night but for that perfectly huge check you insisted on paying me for that awful caricature I made of you the day you ordered me off your ground. If only Daffy had kept her naughty fingers out of my sketch book."

"Daffy was merely trying to entertain me that afternoon. Surely a man has a right to set a price on his own portrait," he blustered. "Now, not another word on the subject. But if you'd only show some sense and let me —"

She knelt beside him and her arms flashed up and around his neck. "You're paying now three times as much as you ought. And it must stop somewhere. I'm sorry if I've got on your nerves. It's the weather, perhaps." She came to her feet, and crossing to the window, drew the shade aside. "I'm all scrooged up inside this afternoon, but I'm going to that wonderful garden fête, and"— she faced him with unconscious solemnity —"Uncle Barty, it's going to be the most thrillsome thrill of my whole life."

Already the stars were gleaming silvery white and a great radiant moon was riding in the heavens when the automobile which Carlina had provided for Christine and her father turned in between white gate-posts and rounded the circular drive leading to the white marble palace that George Potts dubbed his shack. Eagerly Christine thrust her head out of the window for her first glimpse of fairyland. And fairyland it was, silvered by the moonlight and illumined by myriads of soft, shaded lights strung like so many bubbles everywhere.

"How wonderful!" Christine's eye was registering the view across the hedge-bordered sunken gardens to the white marble theatre which crowned a cinquefoil pool. Through a driveway bordered with luxuriant beds of larkspur, yellow day lilies with their heavy sweetness, and yellow and purple phlox, robbed now of all color by the moonlight, they approached the formal gardens with flashing marble-rimmed pools and an old-fashioned green-hedged grass walk, framing a regal Ceres silhouetted against the sky and giving dignity to the garden.

The Pottses' wealth had bought an exquisite Parrish painting quickened to life. There were walks avenued by plane trees and poplars, rich sweeps of lawn and shrubbery, a fascinating glimpse of a little path leading, here to a pool, and there to the sunken garden, or to a fountain beloved of birds, and encircled with shy heliotrope and roses' riotous bloom.

"Oh, I'm sure the little people of the hills will come here to play their bagpipes at night," Christine half whispered.

And the Professor's quick fancy, stirred by her words, prompted him to add, "It's here the leprechauns will come to hammer the fairy shoes. They've made a pair for you to-night, *ma chérie,*" he added in her ear, as he helped her out of the car and up the gleaming marble steps of the little theatre.

The next hour passed like a dream for Christine — the donning of the silver-green gown in the dressing-room, aided by the skilful fingers of the maid in attendance, and the latter's low-voiced cry of admiration, "You look just like spring, miss," the arrival of Carlina when already the guests were clamorous with impatience, and at last the performance of a rarely lovely little masque which Christine watched with a blurred vision from a corner of the stage behind a heavy drapery of cerulean blue, at times a part of the backdrop.

Then came her moment, the moment when Carlina caught her passionately to herself, kissed her on either cheek, and eye to eye, whispered, "Remember, you are dancing in place of Carlina."

Christine's heart beat violently as the curtains parted for her, and even as her feet twinkled, her eyes swam dizzily at the blur of faces upturned to hers. But the next moment she was blind to the lights, blind to the flowers and faces, deaf to the voices that rose in excited babble at sight of her. She only knew that the air was filled with the swaying sound of stringed instruments that were playing upon her soul. She only knew that the heavens were star-spangled and moon-vivid, that she was thrilling with youth and life and joy, and she had to express it all.

And as she danced, they, the hard, world-worn men and women, cynical, with emotions stifled beneath the shroud of conventionality saw it all, felt it all. Their eyes were moist, and tears even lay along some cheeks when the dance was done.

"Isn't it perfectly absurd," whispered one time-hardened society empress to her husband, "but I was seeing myself all the while she was dancing — that May night in the apple-orchard, my hair still hanging in braids, and the moon — and you — and your first kiss."

"My prophetic soul," he whose marital transgressions had been legion and public property jolted out, "I was thinking of that, too. So, that's really little Christine Trevor that I used to dandle on my knee."

He blew his nose sonorously, " I wish old Jack Trevor could see her now. Take it from me, Nell, some day she'll give Carlina a race for her life when —"

" Oh, that's the great Carlina herself," interrupted his wife the next minute, and held her breath as the exquisite creature fluttered like some great tropical butterfly through the parting curtains.

Christine, too, held her breath as Carlina drifted to the front of the stage, as though wafted by perfume, and like thistle-down blown by a soft wind. When she danced, a light came into the girl's eyes and her body relaxed in a sort of ecstasy. At times she fairly forgot to breathe. She had the feeling that she was being stripped bare of artificialities, and that her soul was emerging triumphant before the King of Glory. She was bewildered, overwhelmed with a genuine realization of the beauty of life and art.

Carlina must have been in a rare mood that night, for she broke her ironclad rule. She danced an encore. At the end Christine found herself with the hundreds of others that were the Pottses' guests on her feet, shouting, applauding, laughing, crying in one breath.

Christine's face was still illumined as if from some inner source when she danced again. This time she was a fluttering, misty apparition in rosy flames. Every trailing ribbon, every enveloping touch of tulle and shadowy lace was the color of the heart of roses and her cheeks had borrowed the self-same hue.

Before, she had been exquisite, inexpressibly lovely and appealing. Now it was as if the love of rhythmic motion were thrilling through her very blood, now it was as if she were fired with that great emotional experience which lifts up the gates of our blindness and which brings with it a certain wildness and madness of joy. The dance held all the mystery and wonderful glowing spirit of young love. It was delicate as the silky threads on a moth's wing, as colorful as the hues of a bubble.

At the end of the entertainment she had to face the charge of the enthusiastic guests and for the next half-hour Carlina and she received like two princesses royal. Old friends swarmed upon her with words of praise and congratulations, and new ones were made on the instant.

"Now that we've found this gem belongs to us, we're going to hold fast to her," said old Jonathan Gray, he who held in the hollow of his hand railroads, banks and whole lumbering towns. "My dear, I was always proud of your father's friendship. I'd be honored by yours."

"Being my father's friend makes you mine on the spot." Christine's face was warmly flushed, and her eyes were welcoming and sweet.

Her greatest triumph came when Pavley, a giant of a man, black bearded and with shrewd, twinkling eyes who had been lingering carelessly for some time about the edge of the throng, of a sudden, coolly, without any seeming rudeness — it was as if it was his privilege — thrust the others aside and stood directly before her.

On the instant Carlina broke off her animated conversation with a young compatriot to give a gracious hand and make the necessary introductions.

Pavley smiled down from his great height at the young girl, and his friendliness brought an answering smile to her lips.

"This isn't the place to talk shop, Miss Trevor," boomed his deep voice. "Carlina has been good enough to promise she'd bring you soon to me in New York, but I've run the risk of missing that midnight train to tell you you've broken into the charmed circle and broken in hard. Congratulations, Miss Trevor," and he bowed low.

The girl laughed, and her laugh held a little silvery trill. "Everyone's been so kind. It's been a perfectly magical night."

But even as she spoke she was conscious of a flaw in the magic of the night. Docky was not there. Her eyes had searched everywhere. He had said he'd stay up nights to get through and see her dance. He had not come. This thought stuck like a burr to her consciousness. For the first time he had broken faith with her.

"Well, Chris, aren't you soon coming down to earth?" a familiar voice rose above the babble of sound, and her heart stood still, then gave a queer leap.

She was looking into the bright black eyes of Cortland Van Ness.

"I didn't know you were here." The words came slowly from her lips quite without her own volition.

He edged closer, then whispered with a half-laugh, "That's not my fault, I'm sure. I told you the glad news in at least a dozen letters, to say nothing of the cable."

"I didn't read the letters," was her quiet answer.

"The cable never reached me." She had herself well in hand now.

"Come." He seized her arm with the old masterfulness, and drew her along. "Let's get out of this bally old crowd. They've had you long enough. It's my innin' now."

He led her to an Italian marble bench gleaming white in the moonlight, and cunningly set between two dwarf pines near a pool in which a bronze water-god raised his head above lily pads.

"Everybody's headed for the eats," he said, eyeing her avidly as she slipped from his hands and sat down on the marble bench, "so I suppose I can have you all to myself for at least five minutes. Holy Doodle, but I thought I'd never get you, Chris!" He dropped down on the bench beside her and crushed her body against him in sudden passion.

"Cort!" She rose, panting, and faced him, pale, resolute, every feature clearly outlined in the moonlight. "I won't have it. It's all over. You got my letter."

"Yes, but what of that?" he answered a bit contemptuously. "That was weeks ago. You've had plenty of time to come to your senses since then."

"I had already come to my senses when I wrote you."

He made a move to take her in his arms again, but she fended him off.

Her shoulders straight, her head high, she gazed at him. "I've nothing more to say. Will you please take me back to the others?"

"Well, I've plenty to say," he blazed at her, "and you'll stay here till I'm through."

Coolly she seated herself on the bench again. For a moment or two he strode up and down the turf, snapping his fingers behind him. Then he stood before her, his handsome, gypsy-like face wearing an unexpected pleading expression.

"Don't be hard on a fellow, Chris. It's nothing unusual. They all do it. Why, there isn't a one in our set —"

She cut him off with an imperious gesture. For a moment the silence was unbroken. Her eyes were upon the fan-like spray of the fountain, sparkling like so many jewels in the soft-colored light that cunningly hidden bulbs irradiated. But her thoughts were far away. In fancy she was again reading a little misspelled note from Jennie that had gladdened her heart a day or two before.

"I've gained three pounds already," Jennie had written, "and little Bobby has put on seven ounces, and we're both laughing from morning till night, and it's all because of you, you dear, brown-eyed angel."

"Well," he broke in upon her musing at last with ill-concealed impatience, "what's all this deep study about?" As she made no answer, he flung himself on the bench beside her, and seized both her hands. "Now see here, Chris," he went on, with a quick reversion to his old masterful manner, "we've had just about enough of this nonsense. I'll give you two or three weeks to get ready — not that I'd care if you didn't have a new rag. It's you I want — but you women are different "— he smiled into her eyes with the old alluring audacity that before had always bent her will to his —" and we'll blow off the great event in the middle of September. What you say, little one?" As the silence was maintained, he thought he saw his advantage and seized it. "I've already ordered the diamonds reset." He encircled her slim waist and drew her head to his shoulder.

"Cort!" She freed herself and rose to her feet. He rose too.

"Cort," she began again, then stopped. "Oh, why won't you understand? It just can't be."

He stared at her fixedly, his eyebrows arched in incredulity. "You're spoofin'. You don't mean it, Chris."

"I do. I do."

"You can't mean you're throwin' me aside just because of that pig of a Jennie Chubb. She isn't worth a — a hair of your head."

"She's a girl, the same as I am. She — but please don't let's go into that. It's — it's so humiliating."

He tried another tack. "You haven't only yourself to think of in this matter, dear. There's Laurie — I'll do the right thing by him. I heard of a peach of a sanatorium —"

"Cort,"— the quiet scorn of her voice stung him like a whip-lash —"have I fallen as low as that in your mind? Have — ?"

"Low nothing," he jerked out hotly. "What's the use of beatin' about the bush? I can take care of you the way you've been used to, the way Christine Trevor ought to be."

"I'm going to take care of myself." The memory of Pavley's words brought a quick glint of pride to her eyes.

"How? This?" he asked, with a contemptuous wave of his hand toward the small theatre gleaming cold and white in the moonlight. "That's all right for a fashionable fad, but the chorus-girl business? You'd walk off a bridge some dark night rather — Oh, Chris!" He caught up her hands suddenly and held them against his heart. "You don't know what you'd run up against with this crazy dancin' idea. I do. Good Lord! I do. I know it from A to Z, and I tell you it's rotten, rotten —"

"Please let me go, Cort. My mind's made up. If you won't take me back to the others, I'll have to go alone." Her lips were pale and quivering, and the soft laces on her bosom rose and fell over the tumult beneath. Gathering the foam of her skirts about her, she turned and slipped away.

In a bound he reached her. His chin was thrust forward, and his black eyes had focused in a cold, level stare as he swung her about.

"What's his name?" He spoke as if this were a new thought.

For a moment she positively gaped at him, then as his meaning became clear, color swept into her face, and she caught her lower lip between her teeth.

"Come, who is he? Do I know him? Who did you jilt me for?" He had given way so completely to a passion of jealousy that he choked and stammered and trembled in every limb. His burning eyes fairly devoured her. Never had she seemed so beautiful, so desirable. It was as if he were seeing her for the first time or with new eyes. He noted the smooth, gleaming gold of her hair, the delicately lovely features and the eyes that he well knew by daylight were like brown velvet shot with gold — now they were wide and dark as the night — the delicate depression below her throat, the finely molded bosom, the crisp round shoulders and the slim body clouded in a rose-mist.

"Tell me," he demanded, gripping her wrists.

"You're hurting me," she answered, quietly. "There's nothing to tell. I'm going to dance for my living."

Suddenly he flung self-restraint to the winds. A wave of fury swept over him, and catching her shoulders, he swung her about and crushed her body against him. Then though she beat him off with her fists, he kissed her — eyes, hair, lips, throat. His hot kisses rained upon her and scorched her. Suddenly he released her, spent, breathless, too overcome for tears. "Now," he said triumphantly, mistaking her silence for yielding, "now you know you're mine — mine. We'll get married to-morrow —"

She took a hurried step away from him, then turned, lightly poised like a winged spirit. "I'll not marry you to-morrow or ever, Cort."

"You'll marry me — to-night," he shouted, in sudden passion. "We'll drive over the river —"

"No, no. Please let me go. Please, please, Cort."

"My car's right here in the bend of the road, angel girl, and before you know it —"

"I've come for you, Christine," said a quiet voice behind them. "Are you ready?" And Christine, whirling about, threw herself, sobbing like a child, into Dr. Denton's arms.

The drive home was swift; for the most part, silent.

"I was in time for only your last dance," Dr. Denton said, as he helped her into the car. "You made me very proud of you, Goldilocks."

And when the car swung into the river road Dr. Denton spoke again. "Very tired, little one?"

"No, Docky," was the girl's whispered answer.

That comprised the sum of their conversation on the homeward drive, but the flaw had disappeared from Christine's night of nights.

CHAPTER XXV

FREDDY TAKES THINGS INTO HER OWN HANDS

One late August afternoon, when the sun was streaming into the garden and flowers and ripening fruits were filling the air with warm sweet odors, Christine was sketching under the spreading elm. Suddenly her pencil came to a full stop. Her eyes began to trail a diaphanous cloud that was drifting like a wisp of smoke across the deep-blue sky. On an impulse she threw herself flat on her back in the cool grass and soon her thoughts were drifting as idly as the cloud. It was no time for work. It was an afternoon of sunshine and utter laziness.

Presently another plume of a cloud floated over her head. How softly white and feathery it was! If she were only a poet like Douglas! Douglas! It was more than two weeks now since she had written, and never a word from that young scamp. She would make one more attempt. Perhaps she'd get up energy to send him a scorcher of a note before bedtime.

A voice close beside her brought her up on her elbow.

" I ask your pardon for disturbing you, Miss Christine." Mark was standing over her, the warm smile he always reserved for her lighting his face. " But Mr. Barton's waked from his nap and he's asking for you."

"Bless the old dear's soul! I've neglected him shamefully this whole day. But the sunshine's too wonderful to waste even a minute indoors."

The man regarded her fixedly for all of a moment, then with the air of one whose mind has been swaying between two impulses, with the balance not on the side of his better judgment, said as they moved swiftly across the turf, "It'd cost me my head if he knew I was letting my tongue spill over, but you'd better know. He's rather bad to-day. His pain's always worse when he's troubled. You see"—with a cautious, upturned glance at the windows of his master's room—"you see," he said, lowering his voice, "this is the day Master Douglas' mother died—some twenty years ago—and the lad never failed to go to the grave with flowers. Mr. Barton set rare store by her, and he's remembering things to-day."

"Uncle Barty," Christine tore open the door, and danced over the floor of the darkened room to the bedside, "I've come for a dish of tea and a real good gossip."

"Don't be a pest," he snapped, attempting a look of severity at her cyclonic entrance; but he took her hand in both of his, and drew her down on the bed at his side.

"First we're going to have some light on the subject. There, that shade can go up three inches higher without your running the slightest risk of damaging your complexion with a single freckle. Now, if you're a real obedient child, I'll make you a cup of what Misery calls the witch's brew—your Indian tea, she means—and then we'll finish that article on the fugue that we began last night."

The sunken old eyes brightened, then dulled again. "I've no interest in fugues to-day."

"Uncle Barty, how can you go back on fugues! You know they're the staple of your diet, and you'd starve to death without them."

But for once her raillery evoked no answering gleam. Instead, he moved his head and fingers restlessly. The misery in his face brought her to her knees beside him.

"What is it, Uncle Barty? Tell me. Perhaps I can help."

He turned his face to the wall, and lay still so long that she thought he had drifted off to sleep.

"No one can help," he said at last. "She's been dead twenty-two years to-day, the boy's mother," he added, after another spell of quiet. "My call's coming soon now, and I'll have to answer to her for him. Where is he? I want him."

For a moment or two after he had spoken, silence was maintained. There was that in his voice and manner that made her realize that in the crucible of separation Joshua Barton's heart had softened and now his enduring need of the boy had wrung that cry from him. A choking longing possessed her to comfort him, but the right words would not come.

"Uncle Barty," she half whispered, when she could endure the stillness no longer, "I —"

Mark's tap at the door, and his quiet entry made her stop on her unfinished sentence.

"A letter for you, Mr. Barton."

"Well, well, who's it from? Don't stand there like a mummy."

"I don't seem to know the handwriting, sir, and the postmark's blurred. Looks like New Am — Amsterdam, it looks like."

"Why in Sam Hill don't you read it? Keep me waiting all day. I don't know a soul in New Amsterdam, wherever that is. Some charity or other, most likely."

"It's hospital stationery, so most likely they want a donation," agreed Christine. "It says,

"'MR. JOSHUA BARTON,
"'Merrivale, Mich.
"'DEAR SIR:

"'Pardon the liberty I take in writing to you this way, but I thought you ought to know that your nephew was brought here two weeks ago unconscious from an automobile accident. He risked his life for a poor little girl who was playing in the street. The injury was very serious, and the hospital authorities tried to communicate at once with his relatives, but couldn't find any. We did learn where he lived in New York —'"

"Poor Doug," Christine interrupted herself with quivering lips, "that's why he didn't answer —"

"Go on," came from lips stiff as if from cold.

"'But that was a boarding-house and the landlady knew nothing of him. He'd only been there a short time.

"'Last night we thought the end was near, so I looked again for some hint, and found what I at first thought was a scrap of his writing-stuff — he's a writer, I'm told — but this morning he took a turn for the better and spoke for the first time.

"'Does Uncle Joshua know?' was what he asked.

" 'Now, Uncle Joshua was the person he was writing to on that piece of paper.

" 'This morning one of the orderlies came back from his vacation and I was telling him about the new case that had come in while he was away, and when he took a look, he knew him. He'd once worked as gardener's underhelp for you. So the minute I got your address I sat down and wrote.

" 'Later in the Day.

" 'I didn't get a chance to finish until now. Dr. Brown says your nephew's got a good fighting chance now, but he thinks you should know how things are. So I'm enclosing the piece of paper I spoke of, and hoping that you will believe I'll take good care of the poor young man,

" 'I sign myself,
" 'His nurse,
" 'MARY THOMPSON.' "

"Read — what's — enclosed." The words came disjointedly.

Christine had to blink the mist from her eyes before she could proceed.

" 'DEAR UNCLE JOSHUA:

" 'I ran across a week-old copy of the Merrivale *Times* to-day, and saw an account of the fire. Too bad the old place was so badly burned, but I'm thankful to God you were —' "

"Yes, yes?"

"That's all, Uncle B-Barty. It was n-never f-finished."

For unreckoned moments the old man lay staring into vacancy.

Then at last he roared out but it was a feeble roar, "Some country doctor that, I suppose. Huh, a fighting chance. Well, he's going to win that fight if I have to send every specialist up from New York." The sunken eyes were lighted now with a strange fire. "Get Dr. Marsh on the phone at once, Christine; at once, do you hear? Don't stand there like a — a block of wood. We've a huge task ahead of us, but that boy's life must be saved." The last words were almost inaudible.

"Dr. Marsh is operating, Uncle Barty," the girl reported, after what seemed to him endless hours of waiting. "He'll call you the minute he's through."

"H'mph, that'll be too late for the six-ten. Send Mark to me. We'll have to charter a special train."

After Mark had been despatched to headquarters to arrange details of this intricate enterprise, Mr. Barton lost himself in thought.

"Weren't you and the boy pretty good friends?" he roused himself once to ask.

"Yes, Uncle Barty."

"I — I don't want to pry, but you're pledged, aren't you?"

"Oh, no, no indeed. We're just friends —"

"He left home on account of you."

"Your forbidding him our house was just the last straw. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, but friendship between us."

"He was in love with some girl. I found out as much. Do you know who she was?"

Christine shook her head, choking back a sob. The night drive along the river bank came back to her as a vivid picture, and the halting little confession of his life and love insisted on her recollection. Poor Doug, he was so young to be knocking at death's door! But how like his warm, generous, idealistic self to offer up his life for a little street-waif!

"Did he ever mention anyone?" Mr. Barton demanded bluntly. His eyes were fixed on her face. It was as if he were trying to probe her thoughts.

"Doug told me he cared for some one, but he didn't say who she was. I've been trying to think. I don't know a girl he knows"— Christine's tears were well back now —"except Freddy Blue," she added, after a moment's thought.

Joshua Barton brought his clenched hand down on the bed-clothes. "That's the girl — Freddy Blue. Where were my eyes? I thought — a hundred things now —" he muttered to himself, incoherently.

Christine stared in growing wonderment.

"Freddy Blue," he began to murmur again. "Freddy Blue, of course."

Christine still stared. Any number of Douglas' quiet remarks, and several small occurrences that hooked themselves together into a perfect chain now rose up in her memory to support the truth of Mr. Barton's words. Of course, it was Freddy Blue. Why, almost at the first moment of their meeting he had told her of his life-long friendship with Freddy Blue. And Freddy Blue herself had sobbed that out that night in the garden.

But what had caused Freddy's unusual agitation? This question perplexed Christine now as then. Could it be that she had loved Doug and that after a lovers' quarrel she had engaged herself to Dr. Denton? But she knew Doug had never declared himself. He said as much that memorable night of the drive. Well, then, if Freddy loved Dr. Denton and was soon to become his wife, what right had she to be distressed to the point of tears over a farewell note from Douglas Barton? What did it mean?

Her thoughts were shuttling back and forth about this teasing problem when Mr. Barton's next words transfixed her.

"Bring Freddy Blue here."

"Here? Now?"

"Yes, here, now," he blazed at her; "when did you think? Next week or next year?"

"Hadn't I better wait until Mark — ?"

"Am I a puling infant or a doddering old idiot? Can't I be left alone a single minute? There's work to be done, and at once, and I've got to do it. That boy's going to have more than a fighting chance if I — I have to spend my last dollar. There, forgive me, Christine, I quite forgot myself." His passion quickly raged itself out, and he lay back with his eyes closed and his mouth working convulsively. "I want to see Douglas before my call comes," he said after a moment's pause, in a tone so feeble that it made her throat tight. "You won't hold it up against me, child?"

"No, Uncle Barty." She put her fresh young lips to the withered cheek before she left the room.

Christine's thoughts were busy with the tangle as she walked toward the Blue cottage at a hurried pace in spite of the scorching sun. She realized her mission was delicate. Freddy would demand some explanation of this sudden summons. How much should she divulge? She had not reached any satisfactory conclusion when she thrust open the small wicket-gate.

She had gone but a step or two up the flower-bordered walk when a piercing shriek rang out from somewhere behind her, and drove all thought of the dreaded task from her mind for the time being. She whirled about, and there in the road lay Tommy Blue, a bicycle fallen upon her, and a broken bottle of milk clutched in her hands.

To Christine's excited fancy the street was a welter of automobiles and giant trucks bearing madly down on the child. Afterwards she was told there were but two automobiles in the entire block, one of them stationary, the other some dozen or more rods beyond the point of the accident. Douglas' heroic act was in her mind as she dashed into the road, and dragged Tommy to safety on the curb.

"I f-fell off F-Freddy's o-old w-wheel," Tommy sobbed, in the shelter of Christine's arms. "S-she t-told me n-not to t-take it, b-but we n-needed m-milk, and now s-see where 't is."

Christine saw where it was — a steady, little white stream running in the gutter, but she also saw another little stream equally steady, but it was bright red and flowing from a small, much begrimed hand. For a moment everything swam before her eyes, and uncertainly her hand fluttered to her forehead. Then she tried to fight off the black wave that was threatening to engulf her.

"You've cut your hand a bit, Tommy," her voice seemed to come from afar off. "Better let Freddy mend you up."

"Freddy's got a norful headache," Tommy replied, her tears flowing afresh at the discovery of her wound, "and mother's down town, and nobody's home. O-o-oh, 'm I going to die? Look at all the blood. I'll just die if you don't fix my hand."

Christine's eyes widened. Could she have heard aright? She — why, the very sight of blood made her positively ill! As for touching that cut hand — she couldn't. Surely there was somebody else.

"Where's your father?" she demanded weakly, half-leading, half-carrying the little girl up the path.

"He's d-down at the church, playing organ," sobbed Tommy. "O-o-oh, he'll be s-sorry I'm all dead —"

"You're not going to die on my hands. Show me where we can get hot water and — things." Christine's cheeks were chalky-pale, but she spoke through grimly set lips.

She was still a bit shaky when she crept into the darkened bedroom where, a towel bound about her head, Freddy lay, her regal length extended on a dilapidated old sofa. Somehow it was borne in upon Christine more forcibly than ever as she drew nearer the recumbent figure that Freddy Blue had heroic proportions for a woman. Even in the subdued light Freddy's face looked swollen and marred with tears.

"You poor dear," murmured Christine. "I didn't know you had such headaches."

There was a catch in Freddy's voice which sounded husky and toneless. "I don't. Never had a headache before in my life. I'm disgustingly healthy. But let's talk of something else. Tell me something funny. I want to l-laugh. I f-feel as if I hadn't laughed in y-years."

But it was Tommy, not Christine, who brought a light laugh to her lips. At that very instant the door was stealthily opened and a small form topped with a curly head appeared in the aperture, stage-whispering, "Freddy, Freddy, are you asleep? I've been norful bad again. You won't scold, will you, 'cause I 'most died. Look here!" and triumphantly Tommy waved before her sister's gaze the clumsily bandaged hand.

"How ever did you do it?"

"And I've got to crawl around for you on my hands and knees till you say stop, aren't I?" Tommy demanded, earnest-eyed, when she had done full justice to every detail of the — to her, at least — hair-raising accident.

Freddy laughed. "I believe that's the rule, kiddie. You have to serve the aggrieved person till she's satisfied."

"Want a drink er — er — sumthin'?" the culprit asked, so ingenuously that Freddy laughed again.

"Nothing, thanks! I'm busy now. Suppose you run out into the yard to play, but come the second I call. You're getting off easy this time, Tommy."

Tommy thought so, too, and her gratitude was partly expressed in the fervent kiss she dropped upon her sister's cheek before she betook herself out into the world of sunshine and play.

After the door had closed upon Tommy, for a full half-moment neither girl spoke, then Freddy said slowly, turning her gray-green eyes unsmilingly upon her visitor, "You're a duck, Christine. It must've been an awfully messy job and —"

"Nonsense," denied Christine, smiling sidelong at the memory.

Freddy continued quietly, as if there had been no interruption. "And I know just how you hate such things, blood and accidents and cripples. Remember we talked about that the first time we met?"

Christine nodded soberly. "I'm still fool enough to want to faint or run when somebody's hurt, but I've — learned heaps — about cripples since that day. I don't want to run now when I see one. I want to — to lend a hand — that sort of thing, you know," she wound up earnestly, if a bit incoherently.

"I don't wonder he — everybody loves you," Freddy said, in a queer, choked way.

"But they don't," Christine protested, with unexpected fervor; "that's what you said that night in the garden, and it isn't true. I've wanted to tell you ever so many times — I — you —" she floundered helplessly for a moment, then broke off. There was so much to tell. Where should she begin?

Unconsciously Freddy helped her by asking, with an elaborate carelessness, "Heard from Doug lately?"

"I haven't, but Mr. Barton had a letter this morning."

Freddy's feigned indifference fell from her. "Mr. Barton! Doug wrote him — not me," and to Christine's horrified surprise she buried her face in the pillows, and her body shook with great sobs.

Christine was instantly at her side, the memory of that letter to Mr. Barton full upon her. "There, there, dear, don't take it like that. Besides, who knows —"

"Who knows?" Freddy repeated, her eyes swimming in tears. "I know. I know every year since Douglas Barton's lived here," she imparted passionately, "he and I've gone together on this day to his mother's grave. He said it was a sacred act that bound us together for all time, that all our lives, no matter where we were, we'd make this pilgrimage, and now — to-day — not a word, not a sign from him. I went there a-alone," she gasped in hard, cutting sobs.

"But, Freddy, I don't understand. Dr. Denton —"

"Dr. Denton!" Freddy peered up at her through her tears. "I suppose I'm fool enough to make myself sick by crying, but don't, for pity's sake, send for Dr. Denton."

"I didn't mean to send for Dr. Denton, but, but, you're — engaged to — to Dr. Denton, aren't you?" Christine blurted out miserably.

The other girl sat up abruptly, and stared at her out of heavy, swollen eyes. "Are you out of your senses? I engaged to Dr. Denton? Where in the name of all that's great and good did you get that idea?"

"Oh, you darling." Christine rasped out a sob as she flung her arms about Freddy, and laughed and cried all in a breath.

It was Freddy's turn to aver now, "But I don't understand. Whatever made you think that, and where does the darling come in?"

Christine dropped down on the rug beside the couch. "I —" she began, a deep flush staining her cheeks, but again her arms encircled Freddy's neck.

"Oh, you dear, dear thing!" she babbled. "It's too wonderful — is it true?"

"Of course, but what's all the excitement about?"

Freddy asked, a trifle curtly. "What made you think that fool thing?"

Christine strove for calmness. But it was hard to be calm when her blood was singing in her veins, and she wanted to dance from sheer joy-madness.

"Why, I — you — I've seen you together ever so many times," she began lamely, "and you both looked so tremendously happy," her mind had quickly reverted to the glimpse she had caught of the pair in the doctor's car, "and — and both of you spoke of a secret —"

"Oh, that," interrupted Freddy, "that isn't a secret any longer." She smiled now through the tears that still glistened on her lashes. "The final arrangements were put through yesterday, Dr. Denton phoned me, for a wonderful big orthopœdic hospital in the city, and he's to be the head. The plans are going to be drawn up at once, and they've rented that Brown sanatorium for temporary quarters, and I'm to be on the staff — oh, just a weeny-teeny mite of a job, but with a real salary, and now that mother's getting about again, I can be spared, you see."

"I see," repeated Christine hazily, as one whose mental vision is dazzled by too bright a light. Docky not engaged! Of course he would never love her, but now that heavy torturing weight of mental dishonesty to Freddy Blue was magically swept away, she was free to pour out for him the largesse of her heart.

Dimly she was conscious that Freddy was speaking again. Presently she gathered the drift of what she was saying. Douglas — never told of his love — too proud because of his father's past — and of course there could be no question of marriage between them — it was merely that she was hurt because their life-long friendship was so fragile a thing when he had vowed he would never forget her.

"Why is there no question of marriage between you?" Christine roused herself at last to ask bluntly.

Freddy's answer came in a choked tone, "Who'd want to marry a female giant?"

"Freddy!" Christine's exclamation expressed volumes. "You don't mean to say you'd let such a picayune reason stand between you and Doug?"

Again Freddy's head went down among the pillows. "I'm a head taller than Doug," came in a muffled voice.

"If I loved a man I wouldn't care if I were seven heads taller."

"Honest, Christine?" Freddy gazed at her out of glad, incredulous eyes, "Honest?"

"Honest Injun, cross my heart and hope to die," the old childish vow came from unsmiling lips. "Love is the only thing in the world that really matters. Besides, don't you see there's so much more of you to love him with and for him to love," she ended quaintly, if a bit incoherently.

For a few seconds — it may have been five — neither girl spoke. Freddy lay pensively thoughtful and Christine was conscious of a growing dismay at her inability to control the situation. She had been here, oh, probably a half hour, and she had not yet approached the real object of her visit. Of course Freddy was too ill to obey Uncle Barty's imperious summons this afternoon, but she ought to give her at least a hint about Douglas' accident and the real reason she had not heard from him to-day. Well, she must set about the difficult task quickly, and then be off. Poor Uncle Barty! By this time he must have worked himself into a fever of impatience at her delay.

"You've heard of counting chickens before they're hatched," Freddy broke the little silence. "Here we are talking away about my refusing to marry Doug when he's never even asked me." Her little laugh was half a sob.

Christine made a sharp little exclamation and her heart beat painfully. A thought that had been haunting the outskirts of her mind all during this visit suddenly pushed itself well to the front. She felt the blood scorch her face and as quickly recede, leaving her cold, pale, trembling.

"Oh — I — Freddy, you'll hate me all your life, but — but I as much as told Doug you were engaged to Dr. Denton." Her words came in a rush now. "Don't look at me like that, Freddy. I'll make things right. I'll write to him, no, I'll — I'll get Uncle Barty to let me go with Dr. Marsh on the special to-night."

Freddy had to moisten her dry lips once, twice before words would come. "Dr. Marsh! Special!" Suddenly she remembered Christine had spoken of a letter to Mr. Barton. "He — he's — what's happened?"

Again Christine's words came pell-mell, as she detailed briefly as she could the contents of the two letters. "The nurse said," she wound up brokenly, "he has a fighting chance, but oh, Freddy, he'll have ten fighting chances when I tell him —"

Freddy rose from the sofa as if projected by springs. "When you tell him — if there's anything to tell, I'll do the telling myself."

Shortly before midnight a special train was thundering across peaceful country towards the east. In the private car that belonged to the president of the railroad — Joshua Barton's name was potent to work such magic — were two guests, a gray-haired man who would be tagged anywhere as a physician of some note, and an over-tall girl with odd, gray-green eyes. The gray-haired man was already fast asleep, the over-tall girl with the gray-green eyes was not. She lay swaying to the motion of the express, her eyes on the vague, ghostly landscape that was tearing past but her mind had swung onward, ahead of the rocking train to that tiny hospital in New Amsterdam which, by a curious coincidence, sheltered within its walls her cousin, the head dietitian of the institution, as well as Douglas Barton, her lifelong friend.

And separated by an ever-growing chain of miles but linked in thought, another girl was lying wide-eyed, staring out into the starry night. "Freddy was a peach not to hold a grudge. I hope Doug won't be an Injun. In seven, no, six hours now Freddy'll be there, and then, oh — God be good to the two of them!"

CHAPTER XXVI

A GRATE FIRE AND — THE END

"If that pesky cake doesn't turn out a perfect pippin, Misery, I'll be tempted to drown myself in this frosting." Christine dabbed a moist, floury forehead with a corner of her bungalow apron, and proceeded with a vigorous beating of the aforesaid foamy mass into which she threatened to precipitate herself.

Misery, who was ever a literal soul, glanced up quickly from the pile of silverware she was polishing. "Now, Miss Christine, don't you go talkin' of drownin' yourself. You a young thing, and pretty as a rose, if I may be so bold as to say it to your face, and with everything to live for! But listen to me preachin' away. Land knows, most folks got enough sweepin' to do right in their own front yards, says I. Many's the time I've wanted to do that very same thing, and I'd 'a' done it, too, but for that blessed doctor."

"Mrs. Anderson says silver cake's Docky's favorite," Christine remarked, in what she flattered herself was an indifferent tone, to the accompaniment of the egg-beater.

Misery stole a glance at her out of the tail of her eye, then nodded slowly to herself two or three times as if supremely satisfied with what she had seen.

"Of course," the girl hastened to add, as she ran the prongs of a fork through the creamy froth and lifted it here and there into tiny peaks, "it's on

Laurie's account I'm anxious that cake should be a masterpiece."

"Of course. He's the birthday child to-day, and you sure —"

"A telegraph for you," Amelia hobbled into the sun-bright kitchen.

"For me?" Christine flew to meet her.

"It's got your name on it, anyhow," Amelia said drily, and lingered in frank curiosity to learn its contents.

"I was thinking somehow it ought to be for Laurie," Christine flopped into the nearest chair, and blew back a stray tendril of gold from one eye. "Everything belongs to him to-day. My hands are so sticky — why, why, oh, how perfectly heavenly!" She flung her arms about the nearest form, which chanced to be Misery's, and swept her into a mad jig up and down the room.

"H'm," Amelia ejaculated reproachfully, after a moment. "I can't wait no longer with all them things to be done before night," and made as if to leave the room.

Christine who well knew wild horses couldn't have dragged Amelia from the spot before her kindly curiosity was satisfied, and who yet couldn't forbear to tease, released Misery so suddenly that she flew almost the length of the room, and waving the telegram triumphantly before the old nurse, cried with her youthful exuberance, "Isn't it great, 'Melia? They've gone and done it."

Amelia walked out of the door as dignifiedly as rheumatic old joints would permit. "All I can say is, I wouldn't have thought it of you —"

"I? 'Melia, I didn't do it," Christine smiled impishly, "but if I'd had the chance, who knows, and here I am grinning like a Cheshire cat when Doug's lost—"

"Lost," Amelia gave a little start.

"Yes, lost to me forever"—tragically—"and a couple of days after that. Maybe if I'd been there! Well, anyhow, he and Freddy leaped the awful leap last night, and she says they're coming home after a week of honeymooning."

"Sho, I ought to know better by this time than to get all worked up over your monkeyshines, but you sure did give me a regular turn about that fine young gentleman. Married, you say. Well, now, I'd certainly call it nice if—"

But Christine did not wait to hear Amelia's pronouncement of niceness. She was already running up the back stairs, two or three steps at a time. Another instant and she had catapulted herself across Mr. Barton's room to the window where he sat in his invalid's chair sunning himself.

"They're married, Uncle Barty!" she cried exultantly, waving her telegram at him.

"They're married, Christine," he replied in instant mimicry of her tones; and he, too, waved a telegram.

They regarded each other unsmilingly for a moment, then laughed together.

"Pouf," sniffed Christine, "I knew it before you did, anyhow. Had a letter from Freddy yesterday."

A wicked little gleam appeared in the deep-sunken eyes. "Douglas' letter came in the afternoon mail."

"And *you* never told me!"

"And you never told *me!*"

Whereupon the two arch-conspirators again laughed together. For the next half hour they were busy quarreling over various arrangements for the homecoming of the newly wedded ones.

"Well, anyhow, if you insist on all those fool flowers," Christine flashed him her most engaging smile, "the other dinner arrangements have to be left to me. You shan't have even a finger in that pie. Pie! Oh, Pete, my cake! My day'll be ruined if —" She bit off the rest of the sentence, and swallowed it in her rapid flight.

But Misery had saved the day and the cake, too, and when the snowy work of art was brought to the table that night, crowned with fourteen tiny candles and the big center candle for good luck, Christine was satisfied. It was, if she said it as shouldn't, a perfect birthday cake. But she didn't have to say it. The others said it for her.

Modestly she had forbidden Amelia and Misery to mention the author of its being. But she had forgotten to swear the twins, who had been haunting the outskirts of the kitchen during the toothsome performance, to secrecy. Hardly had Laurie applied the light to the last candle when the nimble tongue of Daffy broke the awed, ecstatic silence into which she and Dilly had fallen upon the opening of that mystic rite.

"Docky, Docky, isn't it the bee-you-fullest cake you ever saw?" Daffy almost precipitated herself in her eagerness into Dr. Denton's arms. "'N' Christie made it all herself."

"It certainly looks like the bee-you-fullest cake I ever saw," was the doctor's prompt and satisfactory reply, "and"— slowly he consumed the morsel he had raised to his lips, with the air of one who was enjoying ambrosia to say the least, "it tastes like the bee-you-fullest cake in all the world."

His eyes met the brown eyes with the golden flecks. The brown eyes fell, and clung obstinately to the lace-doily-covered plate below them as he continued, "Somebody in this family, Daffy, has fairy fingers as well as fairy feet."

It was a homely meal, simple in all its appointments, but the food was well cooked and seasoned with Misery's loving care, and partaken amid joyous chatter, badinage, and many peals and bursts of laughter. Never had those old rafters, though they had looked down upon many a formal, elaborate dinner party, graced by men of note and women of wit and beauty, rung with merrier echoes. Everyone was in a lightsome mood as befitted the occasion, and Christine rejoiced inwardly at the quiet contentment that shone from Mr. Barton's deep-sunken eyes. His birthday gift to the boy had been a check ample enough to cover a year's instruction with the best master of the violin the city afforded. Though it had been an unusually pain-filled day for him, he had insisted on being present at the birthday supper, and now as he sat at Laurie's right, it warmed the girl's heart of hearts to see the look of understanding that flashed now and then between the man and the boy. They had no need of words, those two; they were in perfect accord.

When even the twins could not crowd down another morsel of birthday cake, and the birthday speeches were over — Misery's and Amelia's reminded

Christine forcibly of the brook that ran on forever — they trooped into the living-room. There Laurie played all the old favorites, and then they gathered about the piano, and sang round after round of song. Presently Christine was persuaded to slip into the silver-green gown and dance for them. And that night she danced as she never had before. It seemed to Dr. Denton, at least, that she was a bodiless sprite, a winged spirit, so immaterial and delicate that she moved on air. And to the girl herself it seemed that she had never dreamed of the possibilities of such ecstasy — she was dancing the sheer beauty of life and young love and she was dancing it all for him. When it was over, she obeyed Mr. Barton's outstretched hands.

"You are a wonder-girl," he half whispered. "I haven't been so — so stirred since I don't know when. I wish Douglas had been here, to —" he put up his hand to hide the twitching of his lips and chin. "Nine o'clock," he snapped the next minute, as "the old-grandfather" in the hall sounded its rhythmic boom; "an hour past my bedtime! You'll have me down sick to-morrow, Christine. What's that man Mark thinking of?"

"I'll send him —" Christine made an impulsive move towards the bow-window in which Mark sat between Amelia and Misery with all the dignity of a box-seat holder.

"Not so fast, not so fast," the old man caught at her hand.

She half wheeled and met his wistful gaze.

"Of course, Uncle Barty," she said on the instant, and presently she was accompanying Laurie in the opening bars of "Oh! That We Two were Maying." Her voice trembled at first — she had never sung before Docky — but soon it steadied itself and as the melody swelled tenderly under the touch of Laurie's sensitive fingers, she sang with the same sweet, exquisite freshness as birds sing.

At last, when Mr. Barton had withdrawn with Mark's aid, and Amelia had swept off the sleep-heavy but still protesting twins, and Laurie, drowsy-eyed from the exciting events of the day, had made his excuses, Dr. Denton drew up a huge leather-covered chair for Christine before the grate-fire.

"It's been a pretty full day, but, oh," she half-whispered, with a deep, tremulous, indrawn breath, "it's been a real day."

There was a quiet moment or two in which the clock ticked. Then came the tinkle, tinkle of rain drops on the window-panes like the refrain of a lullaby.

"How cozy!" Dr. Denton stretched his hands to the crackling blaze.

There was another silence in which the tinkle, tinkle of the drops swelled into a pitter-patter, pitter-patter, and then burst suddenly into a tempest of rain and wind. Any observer at that moment would have said both occupants of the room had their eyes fixed on the fire. But somehow she was seeing his deep gray, kindly eyes, the sweep of wavy brown hair which he had a boyish trick of tossing back from his forehead, the squareness of his shoulders, his splendid length of limb.

And in turn, he was seeing the softness of her mouth, the sweep of the long lashes on her cheek, the virginal beauty of her low bosom, the crisp, rounded shoulders and finely molded arms under their cloud of green mist. More than ever she made him think of an orchid, with her glistening gold hair, and her incredibly airy gown with its whisper here of lace and there a promise of palest green chiffon.

The flames that had been leaping high and casting weird shadows on ceiling and walls, suddenly sank. Christine darted from her chair, and, seizing a poker, began to prod the live coals.

"Let me —" Dr. Denton rose too.

"No, I want to," pouted Christine childishly.

There was a playful wrestle for the poker, and then — neither ever could explain how it happened — a fiery eye of coal had touched the light chiffon, and she was aflame.

Almost before she had time to think, to be frightened, he had beat out the fire with his bare hands. Almost before she had time to think, to know what was happening, he had gathered her in his arms, her head was in the hollow of his shoulder, and vaguely she heard him saying wild words of rapture; she heard, too, the pounding of his heart against her own.

Then he bent down, drew her head up, and, framing her face in his hands, kissed her lips. The next instant he released her, and threw himself into a chair, plunging his face in his hands.

"Brute!" he gritted between his teeth.

The quiet was unbroken except for the steady downpour, and the occasional crackle and snap of a coal. Dr. Denton still sat, head bowed, and Christine still stood motionless, rapt, where he had left her.

"Docky," the whisper came little more than a breath, but he heard it.

"Christine!" He was on his feet again, and even in the dim wavering light of the fire she could see the ashy pallor of his face, the dark distress in his eyes. "Can you ever forgive me, child? I never can forgive myself."

For answer her arms went up and encircled his neck. Her lips brushed his cheek. Then she drew his head down, his face so close to hers that he could see only those deep, brown velvet eyes flecked with gold. "I'll — I'll never forgive you if you don't do it again."

Their lips clung for one exquisite moment, then gently he put her from him. "You don't know — you don't understand, dearest"— he was trying to pull himself together —" you're so young."

"Time'll soon change that," she smiled up at him, with alluring audacity. "I'll grow older by leaps and bounds. I'm ten years older now than I was last September."

Involuntarily he made a move to draw her to him again, then dropped his arms with a groan. "You're not at fault, Goldilocks. You're just perfect. It's I — I that must seem like a doddering old grandfather."

"A grandfather! Oh, Docky! You've always been — though I didn't always know it — and no matter what happens, you'll always be — my fairy prince." Her face was transfigured with the light that shines for only one man. He saw it and acknowledged it in every fiber of his being, but still he managed to keep his hands at his sides.

"I could not give you the setting of wealth you've always known," he said, quietly.

"Not always, Docky, not for the best part of my life. Yes, these months have been the best part of my life. Oh, I've learned, and "— suddenly she flung out her hands towards him in an expressive gesture — "and I've lived since that afternoon you brought me home from the club. It isn't money or fame or anything like that that counts, Docky; it's just love."

The sweetness of her was pouring fire into his veins like a draught of some rare old wine. He made a move as if to gather her close to him, but stopped himself — his misgivings had not been banished. "You're forgetting, Goldilocks, your career. You have an undeniable gift straight from the gods and —"

"Docky," she broke in, and her face was beautiful in its enthusiasm, "love is stronger than work or fame or anything. I found that out to-night. I don't want to dance for money. It's — it's "— she groped for the right word —" it's profaning the loveliness of the art to dance for money — I want to dance just for the sheer love of it. I knew that when I was dancing to-night — for you."

"My darling! My little love-girl!" His arms were about her, his lips on hers.

The storm had spent its fury and only the faintest tinkle-tinkle of rain-drops was to be heard when Christine gently drew herself away from Dr. Denton's arms and moved all of an inch from him on the davenport, the better to see his face.

"Tell it to me all over again. When was the very first minute you loved me — Paul?"

"Little Gift of God," he strained her close again, "the very first minute I set eyes on you, I'm half inclined to believe."

"Docky," she whispered, her lips close to his ear, "I dreamed you — you kissed me that night in your car, and called me little love-girl."

"Brute that I was," he half groaned. "I completely lost my head that night, and was ready to shoot myself when I thought of Cort and —"

The red of the coals in the grate had faded into the gray of ashes, with here and there a tiny fiery winking eye, when Dr. Denton said, "I wonder if you realize it's going to be rather hard on you to be a doctor's wife, Goldilocks. And now with that big hospital —"

"I know what you mean, Docky," she cut in. "You'll have to be away from me a great deal and all that. But when the hospital's running there'll surely be something, oh, perhaps a tiny little thing that I can do to help. But I don't see why I need to wait for that," her tone was colored with youthful enthusiasm, "I can find something to do in the temporary hospital if —"

It was his turn to interrupt. "You, child, you with your distaste for illness, and sick-rooms and—cripples."

"The Christine of a year ago used to feel like that, and — and," her laugh broke forth irresistibly, "this Christine hasn't entirely outgrown it, either. But she's coming on, Docky, she's coming on." She stopped; then,

"Did you ever see that old sampler of Freddy Blue's?" she asked, with a sweet seriousness that made him draw her close to him again. "I can't quite remember the queer old verse, but it's something about helping the lame dogs you meet over the stile. You've been doing that for years, Docky. I want to give them a helping hand, too."

THE END

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